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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

System shock

I know the system launch subject has been beaten to death but I feel the need to interject, project, and predict. First up, the violence: I'm aware that America is going through a rough patch and that morality is on the decline, but I've always regarded gamers as the zen-like core; people that either vent or escape into gaming as a means of sustaining inner happiness no matter how grim the world order. Not that we look away, we just have an outlet...somewhere to go and live vicariously through various protagonists. That illusion was shattered when I witnessed the greed and violence perpetrated on people looking to buy their PS3s. No way would this have happened a few years ago when gaming was still relegated to mostly enthusiasts, but go mainstream and I guess you pick up the dregs along the way. Even we were hit with the madness when one of our editors' apartments was robbed after returning home with his PS3. Of course they weren't happy with the PS3 alone, they had to clean him out, consoles, computer and all. As someone who has witnessed karma firsthand, I hope theirs comes sooner rather than later.

As for the state of the launches themselves, I think Sony should have waited until they had more inventory and a few killer apps. Heavenly Sword and Motor Storm would have made all the difference, plus the press would have been able to do their jobs and preview the system before people were killing each other to get one. A lot of turmoil could have been spared if we were able to come out prior to the launch with how mediocre the overall launch titles were. The PS3 has been sold short by its maker. None of the launch games can match the likes of Gears of War and a pile of other 360 games dead ahead. That said, I believe that the PS3 will dazzle us in the future, as soon as developers find a way to tap its strengths without running up budgets that will be impossible to recoup. Did Sony make it too good? Maybe so. It may never be cost-effective to develop to the system's strengths if what I'm being told by developers holds true. Then again, Motor Storm and Heavenly Sword look otherworldly. They could turn the tide. For Sony's sake I hope they don't see further delay. I also pray nightly for anything with Sly, Kri, Ratchet or Jak in the title.

As for the Wii, well, what can I say? Twilight Princess transcends technology, there are enough quality exclusives to keep us glued (Red Steel, Rayman, and Trauma Center spring to mind) and the future looks blindingly bright. So far the Wii has reawakened the FPS with Red Steel, a flawed but solid game that speaks volumes to the genre's potential (imagine Metroid!!), and the thought of what traditional hand-drawn RPGs might be like with the remote and nunchuk has me too excited for words. I pray Japan is on the case. I see the rebirth of so many genres and originality in the Wii... I'm just completely sold. I want Mario Galaxy so bad I can taste the mushrooms. And how about that amazing controller that plugs into the remote for retro games, by the way? The only fly in Nintendo's ointment is the lack of composite cables packed in the box. They make ALL the difference. Anyway, $249.99 with a pack-in and nobody got shot or mugged. Mission accomplished. Happy Holidays everybody: Whatever you're playing, I hope it brings as much happiness to you as Sonic the Hedgehog does to me.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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playback

January 2007

letters@playmagzine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Sonic Blues

At first I was confused. Now I'm just angry and confused. When I saw the 8.5 review for Sonic the Hedgehog on your site I was happy to say the least. As a big Sonic fan I was hoping this game would finally measure up. But then looking at the other scores in the press I became confused and to be honest a little angry. So, as I always do I checked my favorite reviews site on the web (I know you can't publish it in your mag) and found that Sonic fans were actually giving the game 9s and 10s!!! What the hell is going on I thought. So I took a gamble and bought the game. Oh my god. Yes, the game has the same glitches that Adventure had but they're easy to overcome and there are checkpoints! The size and overall value of this game makes anything below an 8 impossible. I realize that there are people who hate the game but they all seem to be in the press. I don't know what's going on anymore. What is going on? Why don't you say something or do something? Why doesn't Sega?

Concerned (and still angry)

Arnold

We don't normally answer letters in this column anymore but I feel this needs addressing. Along with mail of this nature I've also received a handful of mean-spirited ones, mostly from people that I believe either haven't played the game or haven't played enough of it. I even received a few letters from people that thought I shouldn't have knocked the point off for loading. It's been a rough ride. All I can say is that I spent 3 days with Sonic the Hedgehog and came out of it with a mega smile on my face. That Sonic Team feel, the music and dichotomy in gameplay between speed runs, platforming and Silver and Shadow's amazing friend-filled treks... I just love it. Did I fall off some rails and have to redo some areas? Sure. One instance is in a specific area going into the volcanic region. If you use the speed pad it throws you to your death. You have to avoid it and wall run. It took me 4 tries to realize that but upon doing so I realized that Sonic Team didn't place them all to be used. Is that a glitch? To me, no. I skated through 90% of the game overall. The beauty is that once you master the quirks you feel like a true pro lording over the levels. That's part of the charm. To the naysayers: Look, I know it would be easier for me to lie and feed the fire but it's not in me. I have to tell the truth. I love the game. So the rest of the press doesn't like it. I didn't expect they would. They crap on p-much any character-based platformer that comes down the pipe. The press has changed since I started in 1991 when games were riddled with difficulty. Now they come with road maps. That said, I LOVE where things have gone. I love modern games and all of the new consoles. I have changed with the times...I just still love my platformers and I'm sorry, this is a great one. And Arnold...it's gamefaqs. I use it too. And to date there are 15 reviews, 7 of which are 8 or above with two 10s. The rest are 7s and a couple haters...probably the ones that wrote me nasty letters. Does it bother me that I'm more in tune with gamers who lay down $60.00 and play every level than I am with the press? Hell no. I'm with you. Always have been—always will be. –Dave Halverson

"If I really wanted to see Matt Damon's makeup, I'd think about investing in a hi-def movie format, but really... I don't want to see it, and I don't think Matt Damon wants people to see it."

Unhappy camper

I've been an avid gamer for over 20 years. I've owned every major console released since the Intellivision, just because I wanted to play the most diverse selection of games possible. Unfortunately, I've found that I'm going to have to break that tradition as I won't be purchasing a Playstation 3. Why, you may ask? Well, first and foremost, I find the ignorance and arrogance of the powers that be at Sony to be downright disgusting. They've said some silly things prior to the PS2 launch, but I still felt compelled to get one. Now I literally want to punch my magazine or computer monitor when I read the crap that spews from Sony's mouths about this next generation. Everything from saying that the 360 is a complete rip-off of the PS3, to saying that people will buy a PS3 even if it didn't have any games, and then saying that they don't even care if their competition outsells them. Who ARE these guys? What planet are they from? The "guide" button on the controller, changing L2 and R2 to triggers, the two SKUs (and the differences between them, like the chrome accents for the premium version), all seem to be things taken straight from Microsoft. The "new user" icon on the PS3 interface even looks like the preferred/avoided player icons from Xbox Live. Of course there's also the tilt functionality "borrowed" from the Wii, but that's already been heavily discussed. Aside from that, and the most important aspect, is the games. There's not a single exclusive game that makes me think I NEED to get a PS3 just to play. What first-party stuff does Sony have that can compete against the GREAT stuff being published by Microsoft or Nintendo? The PS3 has some great franchise games planned, but the fact that none of them are guaranteed exclusives, they might end up on the 360 anyways (I read that Metal Gear is rumored to already be on its way). Plus, the PS3 version of almost every multi-platform game is actually scoring LOWER than its 360 counterpart. The technical specs of the 360 are comparable to the PS3, and some developers even say that the 360 has an edge in certain categories... and yet it costs less. Really, the only selling point is the Blu-Ray player. If I really wanted to see Matt Damon's makeup, I'd think about investing in a hi-def movie format, but really... I don't want to see it, and I don't think Matt Damon wants people to see it. If Hollywood wanted people to see movies so clearly, they wouldn't use the cameras they use now - they'd use a $500 camcorder from Panasonic or something. But I digress... Many people will consider me a fanboy for saying all of this, but I'm clearly not one. I'm not a "fan" of either the Wii or the Xbox 360, I'm just very much opposed to Sony and everything they stand for. Anyone who shells out the cost of admission to PS3-land (especially if it's through eBay) is a fool... exactly the kind of fool Sony said you would be.

Daniel L
Goldsboro, NC

Burning Question

I've recently heard that the PS3 is a fire hazard, causing fires and actually melting. Someone I know who works in a recall warehouse claims to have seen a hundred, of which 90 percent have been damaged by overheating/melting, even catching fire. Is this true? Is the PS3 a fire hazard? WAS it? Is it fixed? The reason, as I've heard, is to do with the power - 240 volts being too much for the console (So USA and Japan are ok). Has there been anything about this? I am DESPERATE for a PS3, but I wont buy one if they're dangerous...please, what's the TRUTH???

DJ from Hertfordshire

- The truth? You can't handle the truth! No, PS3s don't melt. That much we know for sure.

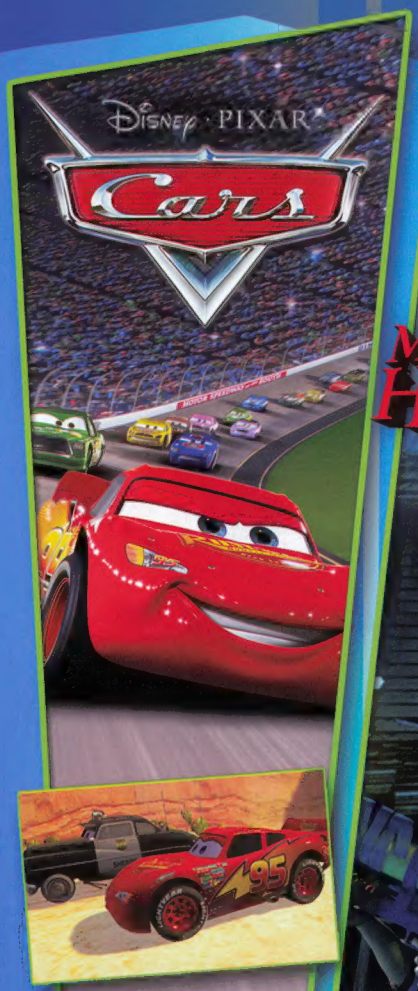
RIP...

So Clover Studios has been shut down, eh? By Capcom itself. Super. I'll spare the obvious (it's a frickin' tragedy, everyone knows this, and closures like this are definitely endemic of the sequel-driven market we're currently living with).... all I want to know is, where are these guys moving from here? Are they going to do a Full Moon-style transition to a new studio? Were they just redistributed throughout Capcom? Help me out. I read a small sidebar in a competitor's magazine, but no details were fleshed out. It concerns me when a respected, original, and (at least I *thought*) profitable studio like this goes belly-up and all I can find is a damn twenty word blurb. God, I'm getting depressed... As an aside, if EA takes over Ubisoft, I might just quit with the current games altogether. I mean it. Us geeks need to band together and put our dollars where the new worlds are born, or else some committee somewhere will be shoving Madden Kart Racer 7 down our throats and we'll all be reeling at how things got so bad.

Justin

PS- Ranger X used to be my favorite game (it's probably Metal Arms now), along with Contra Hard Corps. It was really cool to see these games get some props from you guys and gals. Thanks.

Games that will make your thumbs spin!



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Special Delivery

The ultimate wake up call

I remember you! ...Just not looking this good!

At approximately 8:00 A.M. on November 6, we received a cryptic instant message from Nintendo HQ: "go outside." As we apprehensively emerged from the lobby in fear of being mugged by a giant Pokemon, the coast seemed clear…all except for the approaching armored truck. Then out popped Frank, looking like an aged Mario… "Are you Dave and Brady?" Yes sir… "Can I see some ID please?" You've never seen two people scramble faster for ID. And then out they came…Nintendo delivered our Wiis –Zelda included–via armored truck. To Frank and everyone at Nintendo, our sincere thanks for an unforgettable morning and not punking us in our vulnerable pre-Wii state.

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Wii-ners

America's brain donors wing the Wii

Reports are popping up all over the country of Wii-tards whacking walls, friends, and TV screens with flying Wii remotes. Apparently the same people who sue fast food establishments for their tubbiness and big tobacco for their fried lungs play video games. Ah, but where there's potential lawsuits, there's opportunity! How long do you think before peripheral companies come out with Wii gloves, sporting Velcro palms and an adhesive strip for the remote? If they're not out by the time you read this they can send us our royalties too…

Step away from the keyboard…

Online gamers can't get enough of a good thing

A UK research group completed a survey of 7000 gamers who play online regularly (primarily males, average age 21), and 12% of them exhibited signs of clinical addiction as per the criteria of the World Health Organization. The head honcho at the IGRU, a Professor Mark Griffiths, contends that since online titles are harder to walk away from (there's no way to 'pause' persistent state game worlds), the results of the survey weren't that surprising. He would expect a lower percentage of addicted behavior from gamers that stick to offline action. The professor seems to be a good chap; a proponent of playing video games to help calm the pain of physical rehabilitation and therapy.

EVERYONE

E

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Comic Mischief

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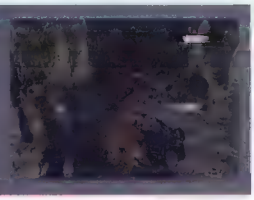
Jump in.

XBOX 360

Database

January 2006



Microsoft / Xbox 360

This duck-and-cover shooter is so good it hurts. Original, awesome, and hugely popular—homerun.

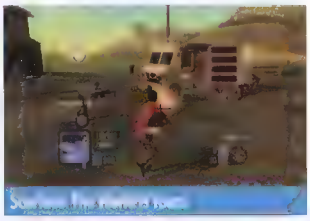
EA/Xbox 360, PS2, PC, Xbox

It's football season, so what else is going to dominate the charts than Madden football... yet again?

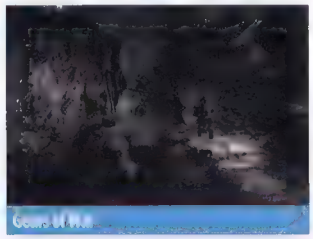
Square Enix / PS2

Role-playing doesn't get much better than this. Role-playing series don't get more classic than this.

	NPD Group Top Ten October Game Sales
01	**Scarface: The World Is Yours** Vivendi / PS2
02	**Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: DA** Ubisoft / Xbox 360
03	**Madden NFL 07** EA / PS2
04	**Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Red...** Nintendo / NDS
05	**Mortal Kombat: Armageddon** Midway / PS2
06	**Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Blue...** Nintendo / NDS
07	**NBA Live 07** EA / PS2
08	**FIFA 07** EA / PS2
09	**Bully** Take 2 / PS2
10	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07** EA / PS2



	Reader Top 5
01	**Gears of War** Microsoft / Xbox 360
02	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** Nintendo GC / Wii
03	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
04	**Resistance: Fall of Man** Sony / PS3
05	**Final Fantasy III** Square Enix / NDS



	Reader Most Wanted
01	**Assasin's Creed** Ubisoft / PS3, Xbox 360
02	**Halo 3** Microsfot / Xbox 360
03	**WoW: Burning Crusade** Blizzard / PC
04	**Heavenly Sword** Sony/ PS3
05	**Metal Gear Solid 4** Konami / PS3

play magazine Editor Top 5/Now Playing

Dave Halverson

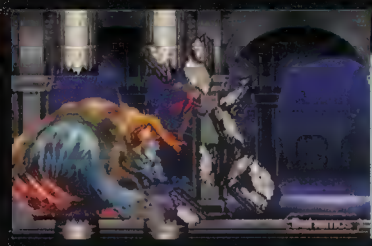
01	**Sonic the Hedgehog** Sega / Xbox 360
02	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** Nintendo / Wii
03	**Red Steel** Ubisoft / Wii
04	**Viva Pinata** Microsoft / Xbox 360
05	**Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom** Sony / PS3

Brady Fiechter

01	**Gears of War** Microsoft / Xbox 360
02	**Resistance: Fall of Man** Sony / PS3
03	**Legend Zelda: Twilight Princess** Nintendo/ Wii
04	**Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin** Konami / NDS
05	**Wii Sports** Nintendo / Wii

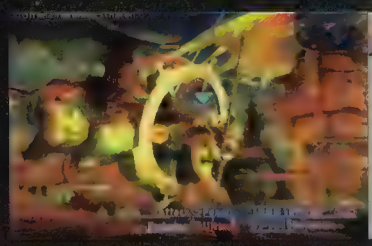
Greg Orlando

01	**Viva Pinata** Microsoft / Xbox 360
02	**Gears of War** Microsoft / Xbox 360
03	**Sega Genesis Collection** Sega/ PS2
04	**Phoenix Wright... Justice for All** Capcom/ NDS
05	**Resistance: Fall of Man** Sony / PS3



Casey Loe

01	**Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin** Konami / NDS
02	**Gears of War** Microsoft / Xbox 360
03	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** Nintendo / Wii
04	**Elite Beat Agents** Nintendo / NDS
05	**Trauma Center: Second Opinion** Atlus / Wii



Heather Campbell

01	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
02	**Phoenix Wright** Capcom / NDS
03	**God Hand** Capcom / PS2
04	**Gurumin: A Monstrous Adventure** Mastiff / PSP
05	**Final Fantasy XI** Square Enix / PS2

Nick DesBarres

01	**Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin** Konami / NDS
02	**Gears of War** Microsoft / Xbox 360
03	**Ridge Racer 7** Namco / PS3
04	**Final Fantasy XI: TAU** Square Enix / Xbox 360
05	**Original Journey...West: SMBA** Vap /Famicon

Eric Patterson

01	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
02	**World of Warcraft** Blizzard / Mac
03	**Elite Beat Agents** Nintendo / NDS
04	**Sonic the Hedgehog** Sega / Wii
05	**Izuna** Atlus / NDS

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[redacted]	Current and Next-Gen	Publisher	Ubisoft
[redacted]	Ubisoft Montreal Studios	Available	March

TMNT

Behind the new CGI feature film and a video game reboot by one of the world's most elite developers, the heroes in a half shell are ready to make history, for a third time...

words Dave Halverson

Whether you're 14 or 40, the word "cowabunga" conjures one thing: For kids it's Saturday morning fun and an endless stream of toys, while adults are more likely to recall the darker TMNT comics of the late '80s together with a trio of live-action films that were the quintessential comic book movies of their time. The bottom line is that everybody loves Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael and their sensei, Master Splinter—long time residents of Manhattan's underground after exposure to toxic ooze rendered them bipedal and pizza lovin'—if not for the creature-addled kung-fu, then for the pioneering spirit that turned a couple of average Joes into multi-media moguls. The birth of TMNT exemplifies the American dream. The result of a brainstorming session between friends Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman, who used a tax refund and money from an uncle to self-publish a single issue comic in 1984, TMNT became a veritable industry when licensing agent Mark Freedman convinced the pair to pitch Playmates toys, giving rise to an animated series, scores of merchandise, and three feature films that redefined rubber suit technology.

Gamers have enjoyed a steady flow of TMNT games ever since, beginning in 1989 with the TMNT arcade game, after which Konami grabbed the console reins and began pumping out blockbuster beat-'em-ups on 8- and 16-bit. And then, like

Leonardo takes out some trash.

"The way that Montreal Studios have translated the spirit of the film into gameplay is as innovative as it is entertaining."

all good things, TMNT seemingly came to an end. When the turtles finally did return nearly a decade later, the series had taken on an almost entirely new guise, rigged for kids rather than its ardent fans; a choice which has proven wise, but is dangerously close to running its course. The 4Kids cartoon brought TMNT back in a big way, once again spawning its own aisle at Toys "R" Us, along with a second batch of beat-'em-ups from Konami, but what it gained through its kid-friendly facade it lost in the kung-fu camp that made it a sensation in the first place. As the cartoon continues to descend into hackneyed sci-fi (man are they stretching), Konami's cel-shaded 3D games have run their course and then some; signaling that the time is right for a new TMNT aimed at new and old fans alike. If the new film and game can tap into both generations of fans and win over more in the process it'll be the biggest multi-media melting pot since the Kiss Army...But how to deliver such a renaissance?

The new TMNT saga is as much a departure from the original as the cartoon was to the comics. As the story unfolds the brothers have gone their separate ways and grown apart as a family. Struggling to keep them together, Master Splinter becomes concerned when strange things begin to brew in New York City. A new nemesis, Tech-industrialist Max Winters, has begun amassing an army of ancient monsters to take over the world, and there's only one force on Earth that can stop him...and it isn't wearing tights.

The way that Montreal Studios have translated the spirit of the film into gameplay is as innovative as it is entertaining. Dubbed the "Family System", the idea is to play so well that your brothers will become interested in lending you a hand, so rather than just going from point a to point b, the idea is to do so with as much style as possible.

The Foot Clan are back and badder than ever.

The more stylish and acrobatic you perform, the more the family gauge fills up allowing you to call on your brothers within the game's 3 main components; platforming/acrobatics, combat, and boss fighting, all of which sparkle with trademark Montreal polish.

In combat, and especially boss battles, fighting solo—as buttery smooth as it is—the odds are in the Foot Clan's favor (yes, Foot Clan; but no Shredder) but call on a brother and spectacular displays of co-op kung-fu take over. Play like a ninja and reap the rewards; play like a poser and you're on your own. The system really shines within the game's spirited acrobatics sections. Beyond every platforming trick in the book, there are chasms and jumps that you can't clear solo but call on a brother in mid-air and down he'll swoop to jettison you to the other side. As the game wears on, all manner of teamwork increases, creating a flow that bonds game and player like never before.

All the while the game looks amazing on both the current and especially next-gen. Beyond normal-mapping, the next-gen version will feature higher poly count models, enhanced special effects, additional fighters and time allowing a surprise or two. Speaking of which, and I still can't believe it, TMNT's development time…12 months. Yep; about the time it took to make a six-level Genesis game. This is a team as unified as it is ultra-talented.

Regardless of which system you own, the core elements that drive the experience are synonymous with turtles that look and feel like mutant amphibians should—rubbery smooth with big feet that slap the pavement—and set pieces that are perfectly choreographed for maximum gameplay accuracy and effect. There's no camera to fiddle with in TMNT. The team opt instead for a streamlined, more cinematic approach where the camera follows the action for optimal positioning and movie-like cinematography. The result is a seamless and diverse action mélange indicative of the turtles' ninja roots and family ties. All you have to do is be the turtle…and look good doing it.

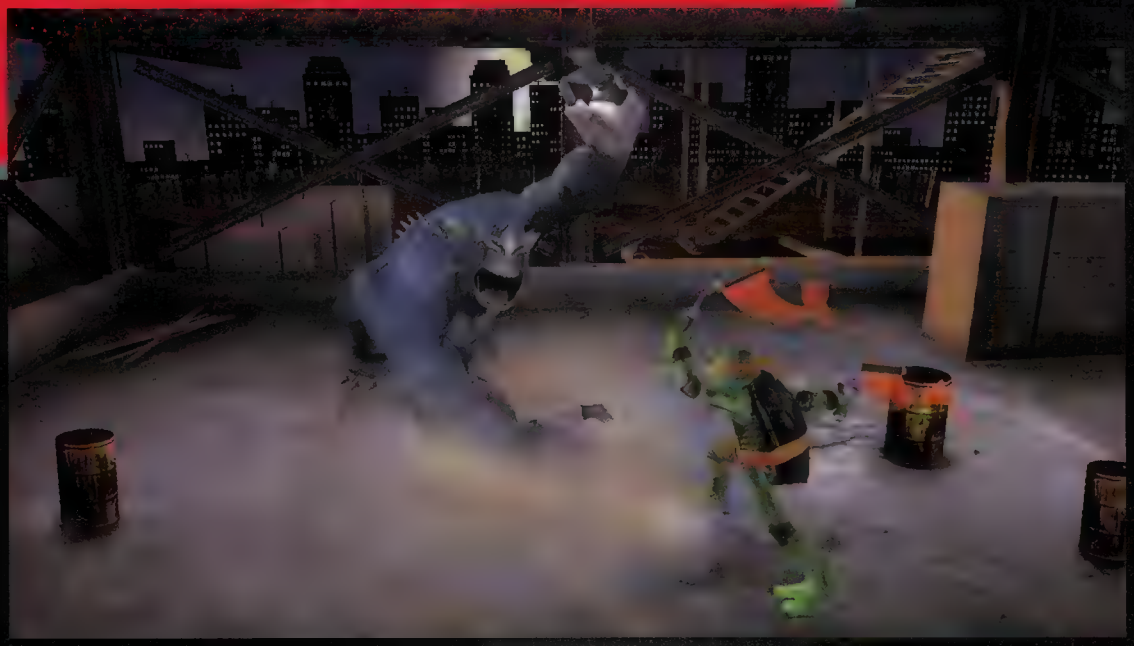
INTERVIEW

An Interview with Creative Director Nick Harper, TMNT, Ubisoft Montreal

INTERVIEW

Creative Director Nick Harper, TMNT, Ubisoft Montreal

Nick Harper: Family guy.



play: It's fascinating how you interpreted the message of the movie and molded it into gameplay. Was there much back and forth or was it apparent from day one that developing the family system was the way to go?
Nick Harper: On day one we had the early version of the script for the TMNT movie and it was clear the movie was very much about family. We always aim to mold an emotional experience for the player that has some philosophy behind it and that is why we chose family as the direction for the game. That stage was fairly straightforward. Where the challenge came was in figuring out how we were going to turn the longing for family into a gameplay system.

With only 12 months to develop the game is everything a product of the time limitations? Did you outline the same game you might have given an 18-month to 2-year timeline?
Roxane, our producer, ensured she had a really strong and experienced lead team which meant we could make decisions fast and confidently and it's that strong foundation that has helped us immensely. Regardless of the project, I think it's natural for developers to want more time to imagine but we're confident that we are creating a high-quality product that will be really fun to play. We are also really lucky in that Mirage Studios and Imagi Animation Studios have been great to work with, helping us with everything we need and being really fast in commenting on and approving everything we've shown them. So because of that our turnaround has been a lot quicker than it may have otherwise been.

"From our experience of showing the game to adults I think the new approach will be more appealing to the adult audience."

-Nick Harper, Creative Director

That said, what's here feels like it took two years. It's a remarkable game—easily the best TMNT game so far and a unique platformer/brawler in its own right. And so it goes with the

Montreal Studio. Is it that you've been working as a team so well for so long that you can achieve this, or that each individual is so skilled ...or both? It's a noteworthy achievement.
The team has a lot of individual experience and expertise in its own right from work on franchises like Splinter Cell, Prince of Persia and Rainbow Six and Far Cry among others. But, to be honest, we all really gelled together at a very early stage so the work atmosphere was both fun and open about what we could achieve. We adopted a specific method for making the game that enabled the design team and the other departments to work really closely together and I think that's how we got to where we are today.

How difficult was it to make the turtles feel like mutant reptiles as they do here? Down to the way their feet slap the ground they feel subhuman, like bipedal mutant turtles should. Is this the work of an individual or a department?
It was definitely a challenge to recreate that feeling. Many of the moves the turtles do had to go through multiple iterations; the movement was good, but it wasn't exactly how the turtles would do it. We had to refine it more and in some circumstances completely rethink the move to get it where we wanted it to be. Of course, having an extremely talented animation team was essential to make that happen.

In your opinion how does the new film, and therefore game, differ from the cartoon and past TMNT games in terms of atmosphere and tone? Do you feel that the turtle's adult audience will be able to embrace the franchise for the first time since the comics?
The direction for the movie and game is darker than previous Turtle outings. The movie is really trying to explore those darker feelings of being a teenager – acceptance, responsibility, becoming an adult, all that teen angst and turmoil. So that's reflected very much in the movie plot and therefore the look. So it goes for the game.
From our experience of showing the game to adults I think the new approach will be more appealing to the adult audience – it's grittier and somewhat more realistic but still the uniqueness of the turtles is present.

I didn't see any pizza or hear a single "cowabunga!" (thankfully) although the bros. seem as playful and mischievous as ever. Does this carry over from the tone of the film?
I think the modern turtles are more like modern teenagers – so they're more health and environment conscious. Rather than eat a pizza they may try a salad. Maybe! I think the movie is

making a conscious effort to break up the preconceived notions without losing the personalities of the four turtles.

What about Master Splinter—how does he factor into the game?
Splinter is the guiding figurehead for the turtles throughout the game – all training is done by him and at the end of a mission he will give the player hints to improve their game.

Do April and Casey Jones make the jump from the movie to the game?
In this game, we really wanted to concentrate on the Turtles and the turmoil within the family. Although April and Casey have some interesting moments in the movie, they do not appear in the game.

You mentioned going text free for the duration—can you elaborate?
When we did our research we were conscious of the target audience's ability or desire to read. So we thought it was better and more dynamic to keep everything visual and that's the way we've gone in the game. So when you see a tutorial there will be an animated drawing explaining what to do accompanied by Master Splinter leading you through the move – it's a bit like being at Splinter's school for ninjas.

Regarding the next-gen versions I imagine the architecture will be the same but beyond just normal-mapping and effects will you be adding polygons and/or animations to the models?

We're doing all we can to improve the visual quality of the game, of course, particularly with texture quality and using special visual filters to get even closer to the movie. We also intend to increase the number of enemies in fights.

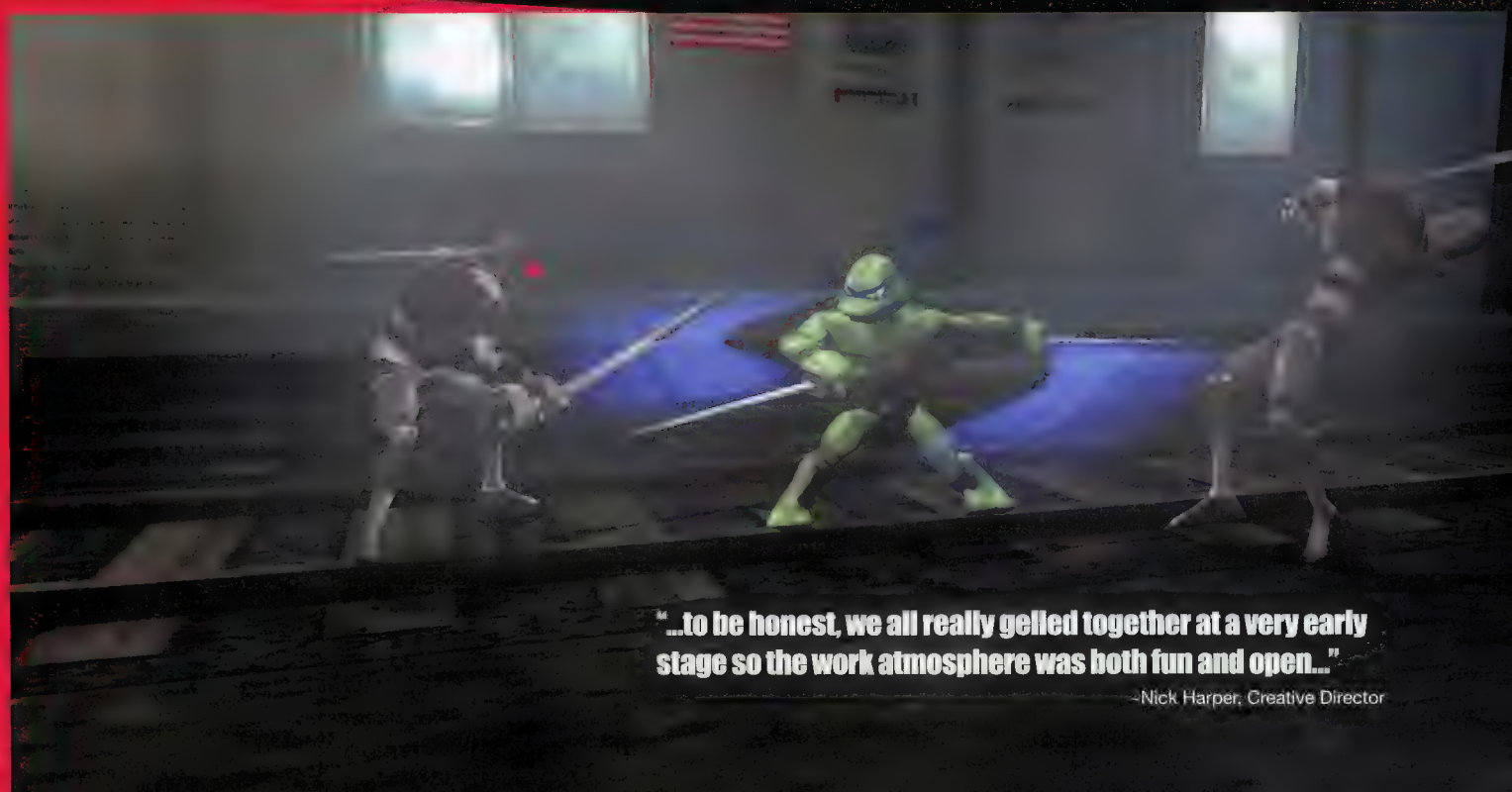
And additional content for next-gen?
For now, whether there will be additional content for next-gen consoles is still under wraps but what we can share is that we are leveraging the achievements system for Xbox Live so that everyone's friends can see how ninja-like they truly are.

Will the music in the game match the tone of the film and if so what is that tone? Will the music adapt to the way the game flows?

What we wanted to achieve with the music was to be as close as possible to the final movie result. The game couldn't wait for the final score to be composed for the movie so we worked closely with the movie makers and based our music on the guidelines they provided us with. We wanted to bring a darker feeling with the music while bringing some diversity in the different cues. Some cues will be specific to a turtle single mission for example, so each turtle in a way will have its own musical texture. We use different music systems in the game with ones that become more intense based on player performance in some specific maps. For the music direction we wanted to please a younger audience but also the old fans of TMNT.

What role if any have Kevin Eastman and/or Peter Laird played in the game's development?
Peter Laird has been very involved with the creation of the video game. Peter approves all the content and assets and is great at providing us visual feedback to ensure we match the Turtles' look and feel. He's also quite a video game enthusiast so he receives regular builds of the game and lets us know if he's having fun or not. So far, he is! Thank goodness.

The TMNT Team
Montreal's finest!



"...to be honest, we all really gelled together at a very early stage so the work atmosphere was both fun and open..."
~Nick Harper, Creative Director

On the movie front...

Working together with co-creator Peter Laird, Director Kevin Munroe, and IMAGI Animation Studios I spoke in detail with Producer Thomas K. Gray about the impending TMNT reboot and I'm pleased to say that his enthusiasm and love of the material is infectious.

Not only has Tom not lost a step since working on the live-action films, but his inner child is still working overtime.

As eager as I was going into this project speaking with Tom has me counting the days until the screening. As I expected, the biggest concern going into the project was striking that perfect balance; delivering a PG film that's dark enough for series die-hards but appropriate and just as entertaining for the millions of kids that have joined up over the last 4 years. Fortunately, Hollywood tends to flow with the culture and so today's PG is yesterday's PG-13, allowing the filmmakers to craft a movie that's indicative of the turtles' almost supernatural ninja powers, the teenage mischief that the brothers are famous for (now with less cowabunga) and enough drama to tie it all together, creating a film that's action-packed, visually stunning and tons 'o fun that won't insult your intelligence.

As much as I loved the rubber suits, the new CG guise has the turtles looking the best they've ever looked—sleek and wonderfully exaggerated—and allowed the director to go places that live-action simply can't. I was also fascinated to learn that the decision to go with CGI over live-action was based on budget. I've always equated CGI with massive budgets but in this case having the film done by IMAGI in Hong Kong—masters of this particular craft—is actually less expensive than shooting live action/rubber-suit. What ran 26-million back in '93 has more than doubled since. And that's before effects shots and marketing. April O'Neil and Casey Jones are also back. They don't appear in the game but they reprise their roles in the film with Sarah Michelle Gellar doing the honors as April. You heard it here first. One more scoop: There's also a movie-specific toy line in the works! This is a full blown blockbuster in the making.

"...Hollywood tends to flow with the culture and so today's PG is yesterday's PG-13..."

You can read the full movie preview and Tom Gray interview in our new entertainment magazine, Rocket, out this January! **play**

Acrobatics and platforming play a major role in the game

The world takes a Wii™

T-minus 24 hours before Nintendo's launch of the most innovative game console in history we hopped on the phone with Nintendo President George Harrison to see if the butterflies were churning…

by Dave Halverson

How's it going?

I can't imagine being

I think it's an exciting

You're good.

Do you or anybody associated with Nintendo

How did you arrive on and the underlying

I can't imagine being

You're good.

Regarding third-party games, you

I think there's a lot

You're good.

Regarding third-party developers,

Well, we're very

I'm sorry, I'm not

You're good.

So a lot of it has to do with the core idea. And we think by working with the developers on Wii we've given them an option to show that they can do some very creative things at a very reasonable cost.

Well, and it gives us hope, because budgets are so high everybody is latching onto licenses and we've lost that original spirit that really drove the industry to this point. And so we're really hoping with the Wii, as successful as we think that it's going to be, will start to usher that back and people will roll the dice and take a chance on an original game.
Yeah, we've eventually kinda grown beyond the place where two guys in a garage can come up with a great game, but we should be able to make it possible for four ideas to come up from the bottom and four ideas to be funded in a modest basis. And so if we can win the hearts and minds of the publishers, and the developers, then that's a key part of our being successful with the Wii console.

As for the worldwide climate, there's a good chance that the DS/Wii combo will completely dominate the Japanese market. But, you know, in the US is there even a need to dominate or is it more about getting the original games out and supporting the Wii and the DS and running a successful company?. Do you really consider it a race now that you're almost detached from the other two consoles?
I think we certainly need to be successful. In our minds that means doing dramatically better than we did on GameCube. If we truly expand the market it's hard to say what our market share then will be, because in some ways we are going after so many different audiences. I think we have every opportunity to be one of the preeminent systems and certainly provide leadership in the types of games that can be developed and played and leading people into the industry who can really be a new customer base for us.

You know, for me as an enthusiast gamer, of course I'm loving Zelda and I can't wait to get my hands on Mario

Galaxy. As long as games like that come down the pipe, you've got us... you've always had us. But the ability to attract the kids and casual gamers, I mean, we've heard it before, but the reality is no one has ever been able to really capture that market. And I think for the first time you've got a real shot at doing that, so the implications there are just huge.
I think they are and you know we've always done great with kids with games like the Pokemon franchise, which is really pretty much 6-years-old or 5-years-old to 12-years-old. We're expanding into the older age and also expanding into female gamers, which is a big opportunity.

You've got my wife. I can't play Zelda because they are playing frickin' tennis all the time.
Well, you have to buy a second system.

I don't wanna get mugged like all those PS3 people...
I don't think you will, I mean, it's not that supplies won't be tight, but I would like to think that fans of Mario wouldn't behave that way.

I'll watch for pipe wrenches. I have one final question. About the controller, are developers being coaxed, kind of, to not make conventional games? Because, you know, for some of our staff and some of the people I've talked to, they still really prefer traditional controls. And you do have a great pad for the console. Is that predominately made for the retro games or do you think that we'll also see a spattering of games designed for traditional control?
Well, I think you can mimic traditional controls using the nunchuk and the Wii remote. And, really it is up to the developer to experiment and see what they think is the best way to have people interact with their game. You know, forcing the Wii remote full-steam on a game that wouldn't be enjoyed by consumers isn't going to help. But there is so much variety in what the Wii remote can do and the connectivity to the nunchuk that I just think there are lots of possibilities for the developers to even satisfy the existing gamers. **play**

New system launch impressions

Wii™

Dave Halverson

David to Sony's Goliath; the Wii has proven that gameplay and price point still reign supreme in the USA, but more importantly it marks the successful launch of the first truly multi-generational game console, and with it endless possibilities: Possibilities to play in ways we've never played. Possibilities to revel in the return of the driving force in our industry, originality, and possibilities to reintroduce gaming's most recognizable characters in a whole new way. Samus, Mario, Donkey Kong, Kirby, Pokemon, Link, Starfox, Wario, Kid Icarus (pretty please), Pikmin, Animal Crossing…the possibilities are endless. And since Wii is comparatively easy and cheap to make games for, if the installed base reaches the right numbers we may, for the first time since 8- and 16-bit, see a true indie renaissance; the rebirth of original character action games. Then there's the system itself: Tiny and sleek with an ultra-simplistic interface that anyone can use. It may not be super-sophisticated inside, but playing Zelda all I could think about was the beauty of the character designs and the groundbreaking control. Look closely at Mario Galaxy and you can see faux normal-mapping too. I feel like I'm holding the future in my hands when I play Wii.

> "...it marks the successful launch of the first truly multi-generational game console, and with it endless possibilities."

[redacted]

This Thanksigiving, I watched a grandmother in her 80s and a couple in their 50s who have never touched a video game before bowl and play golf, jump up and down, laugh and express themselves as new gamefans. Wii Sports was a hit in at least one household across the globe, and I was indeed impressed. Granted, red wine and the intoxication from a lot of sugar and turkey were involved, but Nintendo does seem to be onto something. That something is still not so much for me… just yet. Wii Sports *(Art Director's note: Wii Sports has more depth than you think)* and Excite Trucks are enjoyable for a few minutes at a time, but the boring presentation *(Art Director's note: blasphemy)*, sore arm the next day *(Art Director's note: that passes)* and desire to go back to my Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 make me want a lot more. That "more" is certainly Zelda, but I have to ask myself: would the game be much less enjoyable with a regular controller on GameCube? Time will tell on Wii. I will admit this though: moving the characters around with the Wiimote is a compelling way to experiencing character movement; it's like swimming through a 3D space. You know Nintendo will finally start to utilize the magic of that wand... in due time.

[redacted]

Apple was the first to figure it out, but Nintendo caught on quickly: People like things that are small, and white, and smooth, and glow in pretty colors. It worked for the iPod, it worked for the DS Lite, and now it's working for the Wii and Wiimote. There are plenty of reasons not to want a Wii, but they don't stick. Everyone wants a Wii. I'll list the reasons anyway. $250 isn't so cheap when it's only getting you a game you don't want, a $60 peripheral, and a $99 GameCube you already own. The only launch title that was truly worth buying was stolen from the GameCube. The Wii's online features are in a pathetically primitive state. And of the 100 3rd party games announced for the Wii, 98 look utterly horrible. The other two look iffy. But again, none of this matters to anyone. I suppose Nintendo has earned our faith; two years ago they told us the DS would be awesome and most of us scoffed. Two screens? A stylus? *Please*. But still... Playing GameCube games at 480i with a remote control? That's the future? *Really*? It sounds crazy, but the stars are aligning in that direction. Aiming with the Wiimote in Zelda feels instantly right. Playing mediocre games like Excite Truck and Red Steel is more fun than the critical-thinking part of your brain says it should be. Girlfriends everywhere are playing Wii Sports Tennis and seeming to legitimately enjoy it. Could we be on the cusp of the next DS? The next iPod? The power of small white smooth glowy things is frightful to behold.

TALES OF THE ABYSS™

A TALE OF HONOR AND SACRIFICE, DUTY AND CHOICE, WHAT IS WRITTEN AND WHAT WILL BE.

Luke fon Fabre, sole heir to a family of aristocrats was kidnapped seven years ago, and the shock left him with no memories of his life before. He has since led a quiet, boring life within the family's residence, learning little of the world beyond the palace walls. Suddenly thrust into the outside world, Luke is caught in the workings of the Order of Lorelei, keepers of the prophecy known as the Score. No longer sheltered by the palace, Luke must get along in the confusing and often hostile world. He knows nothing about those who might be his friends, or those who already are his enemies. He has not yet noticed the evil that is drawing close to him.

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Alcohol Reference
Fantasy Violence
Language
Simulated Gambling
Suggestive Themes

PlayStation®2

BANDAI NAMCO™ Games

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New system launch impressions

PLAYSTATION 3

Dave Halverson

GTA PS3, a.k.a. the PS3 launch, was second only to the Sega Saturn in all-time debacles. What a mess. While I am a true believer in the console, what gets me is that people risked life and limb for a 600-dollar machine without a killer app. If ever a console screamed "wait!" it's the PS3. Motor Storm and Heavenly Sword are months away and they're the only games that show signs of what Sony's new monolithic black beast is capable of. And what's with no included component or HDMI cable? That's like running a Grand Prix in a go-kart.

That said, the PS3 is a beautiful piece of hardware inside and out that, over the years—if anyone can afford to make them—will deliver increasingly sophisticated games. I still can't believe what's under the hood. I just hope developers can find a way to tap its potential without giving their publisher's shareholders night sweats. Of the available titles, the only worthwhile exclusives are Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom and Resistance: Fall of Man with no feet. The absence of a Jak or Sly really put a damper on things. The PS3 needs exclusive killer apps STAT to stave off Microsoft's mach-speed roll.

Nick Des Barres

No system launch is ever good. PlayStation 3's just happens to be among the worst of all time. Make no mistake, I'm hugely excited about the future of the platform. Final Fantasy XIII, Metal Gear Solid 4, Virtua Fighter 5, Devil May Cry 4…"the list goes on," as they say. The launch itself, however, was a farce from start to finish. I may have a slightly skewed view, as the country in which I live only received about 88,000 units on release day, and a meagre five games (I believe you Occidental types got blessed with 14 or something). Nonetheless, this is a launch that should have been postponed…again. Sony was only able to ship 10% of what they did during the same period during the PS2 launch, day-one titles were dropping like flies in the weeks leading up to 11/11 and 11/16, less than half of the promised units reached market in America. If not for Resistance, and, arguably, Ridge Racer 7, it would have been an unmitigated disaster of the worst kind… and don't even get me started on the thievery, muggings, stabbings, shootings and beheadings. The PlayStation 3 has unquestionable potential for greatness, but I wouldn't expect too much until 3rd/4th quarter '07.

"No system launch is ever good. PlayStation 3's just happens to be among the worst of all time."

Brady Fiecmar

Please note: I could carry the label Sony Fan Boy in certain circles. By this definition, I would prefer a PlayStation over any system out a the time, and a PlayStation 2 over an Xbox or GameCube. This is because Sony hardware has consistently delivered the games I most want to play. My anticipation for PlayStation 3 may have stalled after playing all the tepid launch games in the few months before the systems treacherous public immergence, but oh well: I still dig the system and its obvious potential. The Blu-ray movies make me very happy, the design is fantastic, and as a raw game system, I see hints of greatness to come.

Sure, the launch could have been handled better—a lot better—but how often does a company get high praise for handling their hardware rollout?

Resistance is a fantastic FPS, residing near the top in one of my favorite genres. That may be the only game for me worth desperately owning at launch, and the online functionality is still way up in the air, but there's hope! In the face of history, the PlayStation 3 deserves at least a little slack. Don't forget the pains of the Xbox 360 launch...

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System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Publisher	D3
Developer	Digital Extremes	Available	Fall 2007

Dark Sector

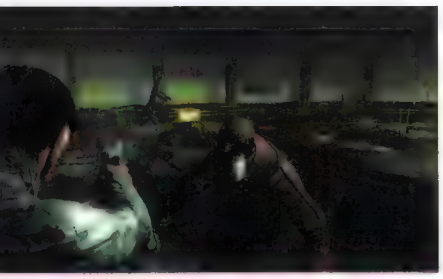
Creature of the dark

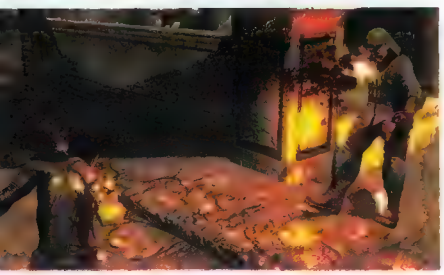
words Brady Fiechter

Most heroes fight an emptiness; they learn to tolerate and ignore through their super powers. They fear the hole inside them as much as the evil around them. Hayden Tenno, for reasons he must discover, feels no pain. He doesn't feel much at all, actually. He is as cold and lifeless as superheroes get.

Accosted by some unknown enemy in the bowels of Lasria, an Eastern European city at the end of its days, Hayden finds himself mutated by a mysterious infection, waking up with no memory or sense of self. He carries a weapon called the Glaive, and powers that are quick to evolve him into a cold killer.

Good times for Hayden, and good times for you, as you take that Glaive—a razor-sharp disc protruding from his infected hand—and remove flesh and limbs from anyone in your way. The missions in Dark Sector are ones of survival. You don't have much choice in the matter, kill or be killed. The game is to offer an anti-hero of sorts, a man who must battle for survival without much choice in the matter, dealing with the weight on his psyche as he moves through the phantasmagoric world of Lasria.





"...good times for you, as you take that Glaive—a razor-sharp disc protruding from his infected hand—and remove flesh and limbs from anyone in your way."

The Glaive is an instinctive weapon, a growth that is a part of your character from the moment he wakes up from his attack. Wherever the blade is tossed, it will return like a boomerang. You can stick it in objects, temporarily leaving it lodged while performing combos with other, more traditional weapons. With powers of retrieval, the blade can also grab hold of distant objects, allowing access to goodies that may at first seem out of reach. Furthering its uses as a makeshift utility tool, the Glaive can also illuminate dark spots, and when singular weapons aren't enough, you can upgrade their powers in sync with the blade.

Weapons and powers won't all be available from the start, requiring upgrades and evolutionary growth throughout the dark journey. The developers are aiming for a character-driven experience, hoping to further deepen the connection to the world and its protagonist by removing item menus and a HUD of any kind. Health will be displayed on the character, as well as typical caches like ammo, guns and items. Simplicity is the idea, from control to function: move up to a wall, and the character automatically sticks up against it. Move to a jump point, and he'll find a way around without applied input.

If you feel so inclined, you can save the truly innocent of the world. It's such a dreadful, insufferable place, doing so might not seem to fit. **play**

A dusky world awaits your destruction.

System(s)	PS2, PC	Publisher	Atari
Developer	Entranges Libellules	Available	January

Arthur and the Invisibles

Dave Halverson

Lost (and found) in translation

Modern movie-game design is more often than not a curse--unending tutorials that pander to the lowest common denominator, a.k.a. the "mainstream" gamer; an individual that the game industry has deemed borderline brain-dead. They are the Dick & Jane books of gaming but manage to penetrate their core demo through name recognition and the sad fact that mainstream gamers have developed exceedingly low expectations. They'll play anything as long as they never have to think, or, god forbid, backtrack.

But what if such a game was crafted with great care, assuring that the player would always know exactly what to do and how to do it but make the execution so chock full of great gameplay that the absence of adventure wouldn't render the game hollow? We're about to find out. I'm not happy that Arthur, Selenia, and Betameche bark out in detail every single little thing you need to do along the way down to what direction you should head, but I'm overjoyed that carrying out their commands is more often than not the stuff that great adventures are made of.

Initially the game is literally devoid of any reason to think as the characters tell you *and* show you what to do in situations so painfully obvious that if you don't know what to do you should put down the controller and re-take the 1st grade. While the tutorial never stops, the actual gameplay involved delivers the goods, with environmental puzzles, hand-to-hand combat, treacherous bouts of platforming and gorgeous Panzer Dragoon-like shooting sequences. The game also takes full advantage of its three heroes, playing to their strengths to unravel massive puzzles spanning entire levels. 10% or so into the game you accept your on-screen counterparts as chatty little friends rather than objects of annoyance. It's quite a feat although I'm puzzled by the game's balance. Mainstream gamers will certainly know what to do but they may have to find a real gamer to actually do it. The game is hard. The dodging, platforming, God of War-type bosses, and Panzer sections are tough, and although do-overs are infinite I doubt many a rookie gamer will see their way through. It's a pity that rather than try again and again, today's beginners are more prone to return a game. This is the kind of game where it's

God of War style boss fights...times three.

pretty and engaging enough to actually hone your skills. Still, if Etranges Libellules set out to make a challenging hybrid epic why so much tutorial in the first place? I suppose the aim is to be accessible to the widest possible range of players. More perplexing is the absence of a 360 version. Why go to the trouble of creating characters so nimble that they change cadence going up and down slopes (the whole game is wonderfully detailed) and give them hair that would make most next-gen games blush then dress it all up for PC but not 360? Atari is on a roll these days. The new quality-over-quantity thing seems to really be working...so can we get it on next-gen please? And one final quandary...I need to know why it went from Arthur and the Minimoys to Arthur and the Invisibles. Minimoys aren't Invisible. **play**

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	NIS America
Developer	Gust	Available	February

Ar Tonelico
Melody of Eternia

I'd like to dive into *her* cosmophere. Ha ha! Am I right? High-five!

"While RPGs with moe elements are quite common in Japan, Ar tonelico may be the first to reach these shores

words Casey Loe

Once upon a time, the slightest hint of a romantic subtheme was enough to ensure that a Japanese RPG would never see a US release. But the times are changing, and the press release announcing NIS America's Ar Tonelico uses the word moe (mo-ay) no less than ten times. If you aren't familiar with the concept, moe is the Japanese term for games and anime that try to tap into that idealized puppy love that can only blossom between a man and a fictional character. While RPGs with moe elements are quite common in Japan, Ar tonelico may be the first to reach these shores.

Ar tonelico was made by Gust, the folks behind the Atelier Iris series. Ar Tonelico seems to use the same basic engine, with simple animated characters over hand-drawn 2D backgrounds, but dabbles a bit in 3D with its new overworld map. The graphics aren't going to impress anyone, but Gust makes up for it with a ton of great ideas, mostly focused on a group of adorable young women called Rayvateils.

Rayvateils control the elements through the power of song. In combat, they hang out in your back row, singing up spells at your instruction. They can boost the party by both harmonizing with your fighters and blasting foes with devastating attack spells, but you'll need to keep an eye on their rapidly rising and falling MP levels and diligently protect them from enemy attacks.

Off the battlefield, you'll want to work on the personal bond you share with your Reyvateil. By gathering conversation topics during your adventure and chatting about them at camp, you can deepen the trust you share. The more your Reyvateil trusts you, the farther she'll let you dive into her cosmophere to unlock new Reyvateil abilities. Of course, all of these bonding parts will seem like a chore if you don't truly care for the girls, and it's here that Ar tonelico poses a monumental localization challenge. The artwork on the girls is great, but can the translators make them winsome without being cloying? Needy without being pathetic? Alluring without being over-the-top fantasy-fulfillment figures? While we can't yet attest to the quality of the final translation, the excellent voice-over work suggests that NIS America is putting a lot of effort into this one.

Bonding with your Reyvateil is only part of what looks to be a promising RPG. Ar Tonelico has a unique and creative setting, a lot of innovative combat systems and the exceptional music we've come to expect from Gust's composers (featuring several lovely songs sung in Hymnos, a new language invented for the game). But will you be feeling the moe? We'll be back with the answer next month.

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Ghost Rider

Riding wrongs, one burning soul at a time

System(s)	PlayStation, Xbox, PSP	Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Climax Group	Available	February

words Greg Orlando

A flaming skull-faced demon on a hellish motorcycle seems an unlikely choice for a hero. Yet Marvel Comics' Ghost Rider has been around for more than 30 years and is now set to take the silver screen and the video game world by storm.

Nicolas Cage is slated to play Johnny Blaze in the upcoming Ghost Rider film, and 2K Games' Ghost Rider for Xbox, PlayStation 2, and PSP will follow on the film's fiery heels. Both the film and the video game are expected in early 2007, and the game will loosely follow the events of the film.

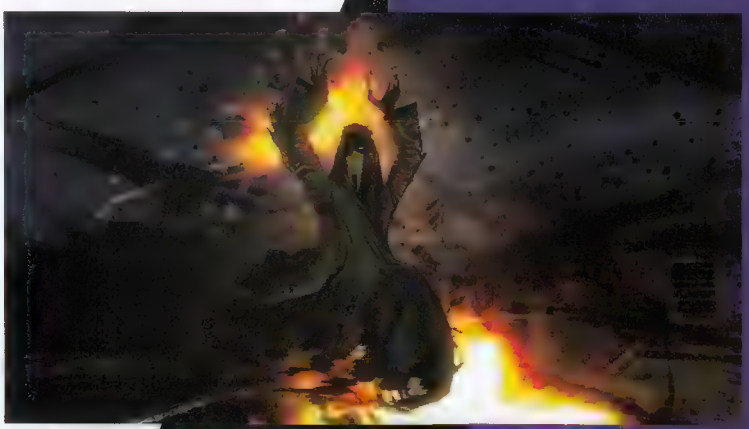
Comic book writers Garth Ennis, known for his apocalyptic comic Preacher, and Jimmy Palmiotti of Hawkman fame are creating additional content for the Ghost Rider game. Here, players will take the role of the original Ghost Rider, Johnny Blaze, a stunt rider who sold his soul to the devil in order to save the life of his friend. As a result of this exchange, Blaze became tied to a demon named Zarathos; whenever Blaze used Zarathos' powers, he turned into the flaming, skull-headed, Ghost Rider.

As Johnny Blaze in the Ghost Rider video game, players will have access to a host of demonic powers that can be accessed on foot, and while riding Blaze's alter ego Ghost Rider's supernatural Hell Cycle. Chief among these powers is hellfire, a demonic substance used to power Rider's mystical chain and shotgun. Other powers include superhuman strength, speed, and endurance, as well as a special "penance stare" that acts as a smartbomb of sorts, forcing an opponent to writhe in hellfire as he experiences the pain he inflicted on others.

The on-foot stages for Ghost Rider offer straightforward beat-'em-up action in the third-person perspective. Rider's hellfire chains are mighty handy when it comes to whipping an almost endless procession of enemies both human and animal. Attacks of varying strengths can be chained together to create multiple hits, and Rider also puts forth simple puzzle elements in the form of destructible objects and levers that must be located and pulled to gain access to new areas.

Motorcycle-based stages seemed a lot more fun. At certain points, Rider can slide his bike under large objects such as trucks, or do a Dukes of Hazzard-style leap over traffic. A more frantic pace made for these stages made the game feel less and less like a bad (and more deadly serious) River City Ransom clone and more like a delightful ride down the highway to hell. **play**

"As Johnny Blaze in the Ghost Rider video game, players will have access to a host of demonic powers that can be accessed on foot..."



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System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Red Storm Ent	Available	March 2007

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

The delicate art of international diplomacy once again is explored when players, as an American soldier in Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2, get to shoot Mexicans and other foreigners in the face until it's possible to enjoy an ice-cold Budweiser and Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner" as the end credits roll.

Warfighter, for those unfortunate souls who missed it, offered top-notch military action in both the first- and third-person perspectives. The action took place in Mexico in the not-too-distant future, with players commanding a four-man squad attempting to restore order and rescue both the president of the United States and his Mexican counterpart after a coup d'etat. The Xbox 360 version received top marks for its intense action, excellent graphics and strategic play; a sequel was as inevitable as the followup to the War to End All Wars.

This new Warfighter takes place shortly after the events of the previous game.

words **Greg Orlando**

"...a sequel was as inevitable as the followup to the War to End All Wars."

This time, the war will be fought on the border between Mexico and the United States, with missions taking place in both countries. Here, players will get to fight in war-torn Mexican environments and relatively pristine American ones. Along with allied soldiers called ghosts, players will get to fight alongside Mexican loyalists against a host of rebels and foreign mercenaries of varying types and skills.

A two-pronged assault is being made on Warfighter's graphics and gameplay in order to improve on the formula. For the technically minded, Ubisoft promises ambient occlusion affecting the way shadows are perceived, dynamic smoke and fire patterns, object translucency allowing for items to be seen behind other items, and both dynamic weather and time progression.

"The combination of all these new and advanced technologies are not just for visual enhancement," David Reizer, the game's lead engineer says. "If you couple [dynamic time progression] and translucency, you can get a very interesting situation in gameplay; imagine an enemy is hidden in a tent. Thanks to translucency, you could see him through the tent wall if the light source hit in an appropriate way."

Artificial intelligence for the game's characters is also in the developers' sights. "We are developing a new system that will allow teammates to better communicate information to the player based upon the threat they are facing. If they spot an enemy behind a car, they'll be able to tell you where that enemy is using elements of the environment so as to relay more concise information— 'Enemy spotted behind the red car,'" Warfighter's content producer Olivier Dauba says.

Foes in Warfighter tended to use cover and stay on the defensive. For the sequel, they'll use a variety of tactics, including flanking maneuvers when it appears they're operating from a position of strength. Dauba says some of the game's tougher enemies will have access to high-tech weaponry used by the player and his allies. Medics will also be added to the mix, and these soldiers will be able to heal the player's character when he's struck down. Also new are the mule support drone, a mobile weapon and ammunition carrier that can be used as a battlefield scout; a series of expanded view options allowing for full-screen perspectives taken from an allied solider's camera; and jet-fighter based air strikes. **play**

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XBOX 360

Cipher Complex

Tom Clancy with a knife fetish

words Casey Lee

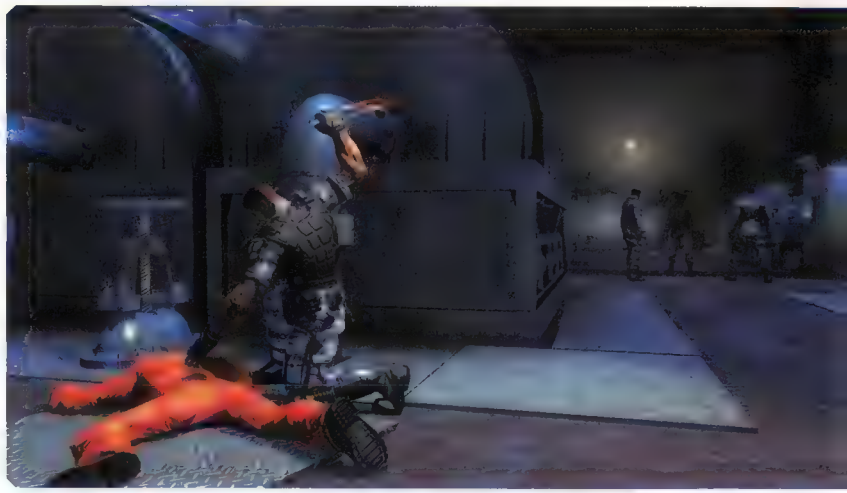
System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3	Publisher	TBA
Developer	Edge of Reality	Available	TBA

The stealth-infiltration genre is a crowded one, dominated by million-selling franchises like Metal Gear and Splinter Cell. But indie developer Edge of Reality have hit upon a new twist that responds to a common complaint about the genre: "Because Cipher Complex focuses on the player being more powerful than the enemy at melee range, it shines in the very aspect of the game that breaks down in the current titles," explains Creative Director Thomas Coles. No longer will detection result in players scurrying to find a hiding place or frantically emptying their guns at endless waves of alarm-summoned guards. Instead, hero John "Cipher" Sullivan can tap into his adrenaline supply to freeze time and explore an array of blink-of-an-eye movement options that can be used to slip behind his foes and puncture a vital organ or two. Think of it as John Woo's Splinter Cell.

The story involves a multi-factional dispute over a decommissioned Russian missile complex on the Siberian coast. Your initial mission is focused on reconnaissance, but the gameplay's focus on aggressive melee attacks and assassination techniques suggests that things will rapidly go wrong for poor Cipher. While all of the early images show Cipher with a blade in his hand, the game will also feature an array of real-world guns and gadgets. "It's completely up to the player to determine the right tool for the job," says Coles, "but we think the player will enjoy the close quarters knife combat and recognize its power." Whatever your weapon of choice, a character development tree will allow you to hone Cipher's skills in that direction.

> "No longer will detection result in players scurrying to find a hiding place or frantically emptying their guns..."

The title refers to more than the hero's codename: Cipher's mission involves everything from hacking to controlled demolitions. No hints yet on how these will translate into play mechanics, but Coles promises that "the title accurately reflects our desire to have a game that is both visceral in action elements, but with a depth of play that takes it beyond a simple brawler/shooter." Austin-based Edge of Reality is currently developing Cipher Complex on their own dime—the plan was to work out the gameplay without outside pressure and then shop it around as a nearly complete game. That phase is now complete, and the developers are confident they'll find a publisher and have it ready for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 release by the end of the 2007. **play**



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XBOX 360™

Hellboy

System(s)	Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Konami
Developer	Krome Studios	**Available**	Spring 2007

Moving from their Aussie Tiger, Ty, to Spyro and now onto Hellboy, Krome are proving to the world that everything they touch turns to gold… In Hellboy players will learn firsthand what it's like to wield the right hand of doom as they guide our crimson-skinned hero on a course to uncover a fiendish plot for world domination, featuring highly destructible levels and context-sensitive combat. ***DH***

Overlord

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	**Publisher**	Codemasters
Developer	Triumph Studios	**Available**	Spring 2007

Fans of Goblin Commander (do I hear crickets?) er…God-style games, prepare yourselves for the next level of demonic minion control. Hear evil, see evil, speak evil, and while you're at it, do evil… Or better yet, get your demon horde to do it for you through a simple command set or get your hands bloody and hack into some gristle. Stay tuned for much more on one of '07's most promising new original 360 games. ***DH***

DIRT: Colin McRae Off-Road

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	**Publisher**	Codemasters
Developer	Codemasters	**Available**	Q2 2007

The sensational experience of a face full of mud returns in DIRT. With over 40 vehicles, McRae is being developed with the new NEON game engine, meaning each car will handle with impeccable physics through dust and rain alike. NEON also models air currents, and everything in the game will react to drafts -- a strong wind will affect not only trees and dirt, but the cars themselves. 12 different car classes to race in rally stages the world over. ***HC***

Devil May Cry 4

System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	**Available**	TBA

Players everywhere have been wondering if Dante's absence from DMC4 is just a Metal Gear Solid thing. Turns out, Dante has gone seemingly psychotic, and is killing hundreds! It's up to Nero, and his "Devil Bringer" combat system to discover the truth in the first next-gen Devil May Cry. Nonstop combos unlock abilities for Nero's right arm, as the story uncovers the secrets to his cool cynicism. And it's directed by the guy who did Resident Evil 4! ***HC***

Halo 3

System(s)	Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Microsoft
Developer	Bungie	**Available**	2007

Finally, the Halo 2 killer. Halo 3 arrives in mid-2007, but not before players have a chance to battle online in Beta tournaments. Four million Live users will help Bungie tweak gameplay before the game goes gold. Enhanced AI, real-time lighting, and new weapons and characters are just some of the features cooked up by the Master Chief. Don't miss the commercial on December 4th … unless you already did. ***HC***

Fold so A meets B (A)

(B)

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XBOX 360™

CliffyB

Cliff Bleszinski, aka CliffyB, happens to be the lead designer of Epic Games, who just gave you the incredible Gears of War. I caught up with Cliffy at his game's world-premiere release event at Gamestop in Universal City Walk.

words

play: So the games finally out. You're getting a great response, even from people you might not expect would play such a game and love it.
CliffyB: We were going for something that felt intentional, and heavy, and deliberate, and solid. I think if you look at the transition from 8-bit to 16-bit, there was this generation where games were, they were OK. They felt kind of loose and squiggly. And once we hit that Genesis and SNES area, everything looked, you know: a dragon looked like a dragon, a sword started to look like a sword. Sound effects started to sound right, everything felt tight. And I think we're finally starting to get to that same type of place. Look at Gears, you can see everything in the universe, everything feels crisp and deliberate. It just all feels like a solid fun experience. We nailed what we were going for.

Maybe this is an obvious question, but I don't hear a lot of obvious answers to it: are you proud of what you've achieved. This is a pretty giant game, but developers I talk to right now don't seem so keen on feeling good about the giant games.
I think everyone in this industry in general forgets how fu**ing cool it is. Every kid wants your job. I think we're fortunate though in our position here at Epic. There's a reason a lot of those developers seem beaten down, because there's a corporate machine out there that's grinding out a lot of garbage, and they feel like they're part of it. I'm in a fortunate position here at Epic, we can do what we want. Microsoft's our partner, they don't own us, and if you win over your publisher. I mean, I went in there for the greenlight meeting two years ago, and I'm like, "here's what we're going to do, we're going to do A, B, and C. It's gonna just be bad ass." They came through with tons of marketing support, tons of PR support and everything. This is the culmination of it all.

> "You know, we're capturing an entirely new generation of people who just get it."

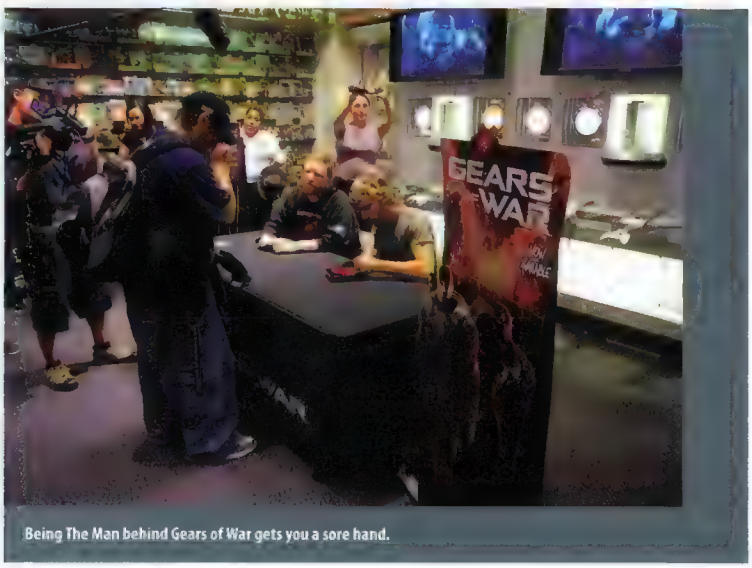
You really made exactly what you wanted?
Yeah, I'm extremely fortunate in that regard. How often do you see an original IP like this that gets this level of support. But I think this is what the industry needs. We have mind share. We have gamer's minds for, 20, 30, 40, however many hours they're [playing our games.] The TV and film guys would kill to have what we have. The advertisers, everybody. You know, we're capturing an entirely new generation of people who just get it. We get what that older generation doesn't.

Putting so much energy into the project, where does that leave you now?
It's a little tiring, man. I'm just in promo mode. Reading the reviews, playing the game with gamers online when it's out. Kissing babies and shaking hands. I actually found myself after doing 7 days a week, 12 hours a day for six weeks in a row, not knowing what to do with myself. My friends will be like, "Hey, let's go do some stuff." And I'm like, "What? You mean it doesn't involve work?" I don't know what to do.

How did you keep from getting too burned out?
You gotta pace yourself. I think we did a really good job of managing the crunch. The game cost less than most next-generation games. We were smart about it, our tech and our tools allowed for it. Now that the game's out, I feel really good. We're definitely proud. **play**

Emergence Day Coverage

Fans lined up around the corner of Universal City, Hollywood's Game Stop to be the first to get their hands on a signed copy of Gears of War.



Being The Man behind Gears of War gets you a sore hand.

Art: Yoshitaka Tamaki

Best-of series Part 5

Role Playing Games

RPG

compiled by Dave Halverson

modus operandi

Tricks of the trade

Looting isn't only okay; it's encouraged.

Attackers patiently wait their turn to strike.

Townspeople cry out for warriors to save their town, yet charge those warriors an arm and a leg for staying at the inn or buying supplies.

There's always a young child or old man stuck in a cave in need of rescue, who somehow made it safely to the deepest part of a cave you can barely survive with an entire party.

Monsters generally carry loose change or some form of currency.

Full arsenals of weapons and potions fit nicely into ones pants.

Party members magically merge into a single being between battles or scenarios.

As a rule, every demon, overlord, or megalomaniac wants to rule the world.

People often become giants when exploring the wilderness.

You can carry a massive steel sword and shield but only a limited quantity of tiny potion vials.

Don't even try to leave town unprepared.

Consensus play Top 25

1. Final Fantasy VII / PlayStation
2. Final Fantasy XII / PlayStation 2
3. Azel: Panzer Dragoon RPG / Sega Saturn
4. Phantasy Star / Sega Master System
5. Dragon Quest VIII / PlayStation 2
6. Final Fantasy VI / SNES
7. Chrono Cross / PlayStation
8. Chrono Trigger / SNES
9. Lunar: Silver Star Story / PlayStation
10. Lunar: Eternal Blue / Sega CD
11. Genso Suikoden II / PlayStation
12. Phantasy Star 2 / Genesis
13. Grandia / Sega Saturn
14. Final Fantasy IX / PlayStation
15. Final Fantasy X / PlayStation 2
16. Phantasy Star IV / Genesis
17. Grandia II / Dreamcast
18. Suikoden / PlayStation
19. Vagrant Story / PlayStation
20. Ultima VII / PC
21. Super Mario RPG / SNES
22. Dragon Quest IV / Famicom
23. Shining Force / Genesis
24. Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door / GameCube
25. Shining in the Darkness / Genesis

A great RPG is more than the sum of its parts—they can be life-altering events; lingering for decades in your fondest memories. Who can't instantly summon musical selections from Final Fantasy or Lunar? RPG soundtracks can be as popular as the games themselves, or sometimes more so. Take Ys on the TurboGrafx-CD. We were colliding tiny sprites to do battle but the music elevated the experience to exalted status. We learned a lot from this particular "best of", mainly that technology can't erase the indelible memories of the past. No matter how archaic the RPGs of yesteryear seem now their impact will linger on forever.

Dave Halverson Top Ten

1. Final Fantasy XII / PS2
2. FF VII / PS
3. Final Fantasy IX / PS
4. Shining the Holy Arc / Saturn
5. Super Mario RPG / SNES
6. Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door / GameCube
7. Dragon Quest VIII / PlayStation 2
8. Azel: Panzer Dragoon RPG / Saturn
9. Vagrant Story / PlayStation
10. Shining in the Darkness / Genesis

Best-of series Part 5

RPG

More Editor Picks

Brady Fiechter
Top Ten

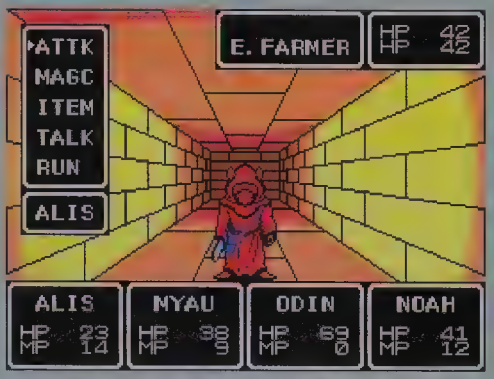
01. Final Fantasy VI / SNES
02. Final Fantasy IX / PlayStation
03. Chrono Cross / PlayStation
04. Chrono Trigger / SNES
05. Lunar: Silver Star Story / Sega CD
06. Suikoden / PlayStation
07. Dragon Quest VIII / PlayStation 2
08. Suikoden II / PlayStation
09. Final Fantasy VII / PlayStation
10. Grandia / Sega Saturn

Greg Orlando
Top Ten

01. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic / Xbox, PC, MAC
02. Final Fantasy XII / PlayStation 2
03. Wizardry / PC, MAC
04. Panzer Dragoon Saga / Sega Saturn
05. Grandia II / Dreamcast
06. Final Fantasy VII / PlayStation
07. Paper Mario 64 / Nintendo 64
08. Fallout / PC, MAC
09. Ultima II: Revenge of the Enchantress / PC, MAC
10. Freedom Force / PC, MAC

Casey Loe
Top Ten

01. Grandia / Sega Saturn
02. Phantasy Star II /Genesis
03. Lunar: Eternal Blue / Mega CD
04. Phantasy Star / Sega Master System
05. Final Fantasy VII / PlayStation
06. Azel: Panzer Dragoon RPG / Sega Saturn
07. Ultima VII: The Black Gate /PC
08. Chrono Cross / PlayStation
09. Suikoden II / PlayStation
10. Dragon Quest VIII / PlayStation 2



Nick Des Barres
Top Ten

01. Genso Suikoden II / PlayStation
02. Phantasy Star / Sega Master System
03. Azel: Panzer Dragoon RPG / Saturn
04. Dragon Quest IV / Famicom
05. Lunar: Eternal Blue / Mega-CD
06. Grandia / Saturn
07. Final Fantasy VII / PlayStation
08. Final Fantasy XII / PlayStation 2
09. Chrono Cross / PlayStation
10. Tengai Makyo II: Manji-Maru / PC-Engine Super CD-ROM

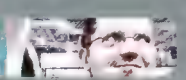
Dai Kohama
Top Ten

01. Dragon Quest III / Famicom
02. Mother 3 / GBA
03. Phantasy Star / Sega MS
04. Lunar: Eternal Blue / Mega CD
05. Final Fantasy III / Famicom
06. Chrono Trigger / Super Famicom
07. Final Fantasy X / PS2
08. Shining Force / Mega Drive
09. Dragon Quest / Famicom
10. Mother / Famicom

Mike Griffin
Top Ten

01. Phantasy Star / Sega Master System
02. Dragon Quest VIII / PlayStation 2
03. Shining Force 3 / Saturn
04. Lunar: Silver Star Story / PlayStation
05. Final Fantasy VII / PlayStation
06. Grandia / PlayStation
07. Phantasy Star IV / Genesis
08. Final Fantasy VI / SNES
09. Panzer Dragoon Saga / Saturn
10. Skies of Arcadia / GameCube

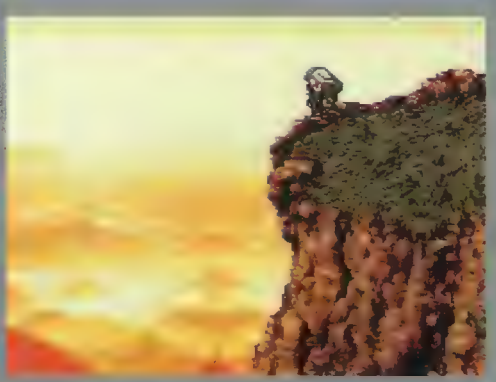
Eric Patterson
Top Ten



01. Final Fantasy XII / PS2
02. Phantasy Star / SMS
03. Final Fantasy VI / SNES
04. Final Fantasy X / PS2
05. Star Ocean 3: 'Til the End of Time / PS2
06. Chrono Cross / PS
07. Suikoden II / PS
08. Persona / PS
09. Breath of Fire V: Dragon Quarter / PS2
10. D&D: Curse of the Azure Bonds / Mac

Heather Campbell
Top Ten

01. Final Fantasy XII / PlayStation 2
02. Final Fantasy XI (Online) PC
03. Final Fantasy VIII / PlayStation
04. Suikoden / PlayStation
05. Earthbound / SNES
06. Lunar / Sega CD
07. Contact / Nintendo DS
08. Final Fantasy VI / SNES
09. Vagrant Story / PlayStation
10. Chrono Trigger / SNES



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PlayStation 2

VIZ media

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Reviews

January 2007

Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, and open-world
Now playing: Zelda: Twilight Princess, Viva Pinata, Red Steel
Wii or PS3? Wii. As much as I know I'll love Heavenly Sword and Motor Storm the Wii seems poised to open so many doors...

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

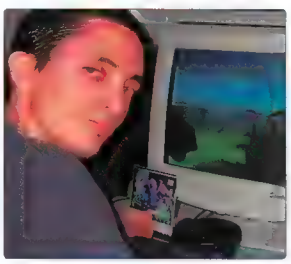
Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Viva Pinata, Gears of War
Wii or PS3? Wii. The bastards stole my PS3.

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Gears of War
p. 056

The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Portrait of Ruin, Gears of War
Wii or PS3? Wii. By a lot.

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: FF XII, Guitar Hero 2
Wii or PS3? Wii till a price drop!

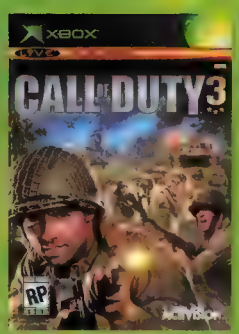
Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

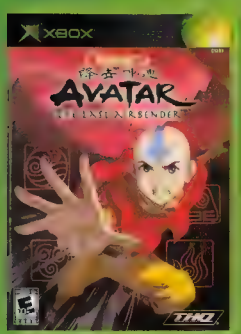
Mike Hobbs
Art Director

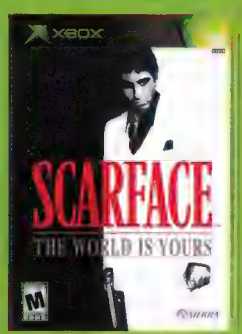
Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Zelda, Wii Sports
Wii or PS3? Wii, it's more innovative and more fun.

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

NEW GAMES. ORIGINAL XBOX.







PRODUCTS RANGE FROM RATING PENDING TO MATURE
RP-M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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system(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	November
Developer	Ubisoft Paris	Online/Multi	4-player split-screen	ESRB Rating	Teen

Red Steel

Fresh baked FPS!

words **Dave Halverson**

"The ports just don't get it done, but games made for Wii feel like nothing else."

Red Steel score 8.5

Surrounded by jaw-droppingly beautiful first-person shooters like Call of Duty 3, and Resistance: Fall of Man on next-gen, I remained for the most part completely uninterested. Traditional first-person shooting is just plain tired. Unless they're gothic or possess a female lead, I'll take a pass. Coming off of the Wii Call of Duty 3—all 10 minutes I could stomach of it—I soon found myself utterly engaged in Ubisoft's Wii-exclusive Red Steel; knee deep in a Yakuza quagmire. I've always maintained that the Wii's success lies in Nintendo's ability to either produce enough exclusive titles or entice 3rd parties to produce enough Wii exclusive games—tailor-made for the remote and nunchuk and the system's stalwart hardware—to assure the console maintain its alternative status. The ports just don't get it done, but games made for Wii feel like nothing else. What makes Red Steel shine is a mixture of slick graphic novel-style cut-scenes, deft use of the hardware (reflection maps abound) and its wonderfully orchestrated gun and sword play. It's not without hitches (pointing too far up puts you in a spin cycle) but once you hone in on Red's distinct techniques you become attached to the floating arms on screen as if you're shoulder deep into the virtual world. I can see where one might be put off by the lag time in the sword fighting but with practice you come to realize that the game doesn't mimic your moves so much as perform the specific action when timed correctly. Ubi Paris has taken great care in slowly ramping up the AI too, to soften the learning curve in preparation of your arrival in Tokyo when technique becomes paramount. Mastering the Hammer Attack and Little Scorpion is extremely rewarding, as is the game's intuitive duck-and-cover shooting, aided by a simple lock-on and the coolest zoom ever, performed by merely stretching your arm forward. I was surprised to find so many destructible elements in the environments too. Limited to areas where it has cinematic effect, it greatly enhances the overall feeling of being there without putting a strain on the CPU. I could do without hearing "Stop you bastard!" on a constant loop and smoothing out some of the in-game cut scene animation would be nice, but I believe that the first true 3rd-party Wii franchise has been born. **play**

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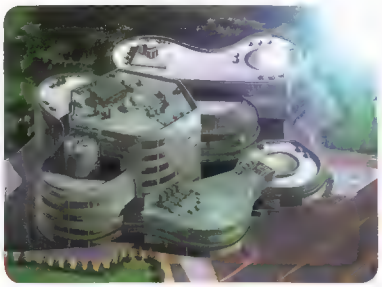
System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Atlus	Available	November
Developer	Atlus	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

Trauma Center
Second Opinion

Quirky DS fun on the big screen

words **Casey Loe**



According to Zach Braff's voiceover on Scrubs, it's hard watching the same people step through the doors of your E.R. time and time again. So the Wii launch must have been a tough week for Dr. Derek Stiles, forced to operate yet again on the mopey rocker with the throat polyps, the suicidal high schooler, and the little girl with a gut full of bugs. Advances in medical technology have allowed him to replace his flimsy plastic stylus with the eleven-in-one surgical beast that is the Wiimote-Nunchuk combo, but I'm not sure that's reason enough to revisit the Trauma Center so soon after the DS version's release. But for those who missed out on the original Trauma Center, this is a great time to start playing doctor.

Surely everyone has heard of Trauma Center by now, so let's zip through the synopsis: You got crazy-intense surgeries, bitchy nurses, sci-fi medical weirdness, and all the throbbing man-spleen you can handle. But now instead of saving lives with strained eyes and a toothpick-sized stylus, you can enjoy the aforementioned man-spleen on your living room TV, slice up patients with the elegant Wiimote, and use the Nunchuk to switch surgical implements without looking away from the action. While most of the tools function similarly, the Wiimote gives a new twist to the forceps and allows you to defibrillate patients by pushing both parts of the controller towards the screen. Sadly, the game does not allow you to slap the game's cast of annoying supporting characters with a quick swipe of your Wiimote wrist.

The revised controls and new selectable difficulty modes (which can be set for each surgery) will please Trauma Center veterans who are returning for a second shift, but not as much as the assortment of new surgeries. Instead of just tacking on a new chapter at the end, the added content includes a few drastically altered operations in Derek's storyline and an all-new (but very short) parallel story starring the intriguing Dr. Nozomi Weaver. These new surgeries feature many Wii-exclusive actions, such as rotating the Wiimote to realign a patient's bones or remove screws on a ticking time bomb. Some will leave Trauma Center fans salivating for a true Wii sequel, but others—like that ridiculous bomb mission—are so infuriating you'll need the wrist strip to prevent you from hurling your Wiimote into the TV. Nozomi's story is certainly a nice bonus, but there are only a handful of new surgeries in all. With no other frills to fill up the disc (they couldn't even voice the intermissions?), it's hard to justify buying Second Opinion if you already own Trauma Center: Under the Knife. For those who are new to the world of video game surgery, Trauma Center: Second Opinion is a standout title in the Wii's launch line-up. But only the most passionate of DS Trauma Center fans will be satisfied with the amount of new content. **play**

Trauma Center: Second Opinion — score 8.0

+

–

Fun with operations.

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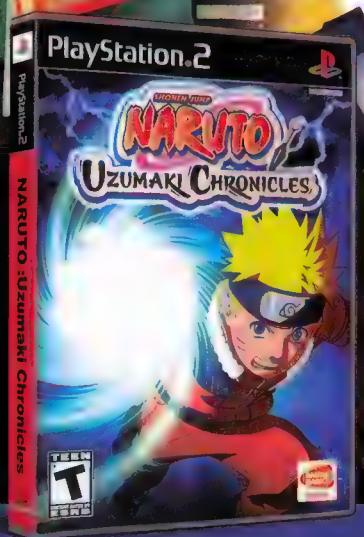

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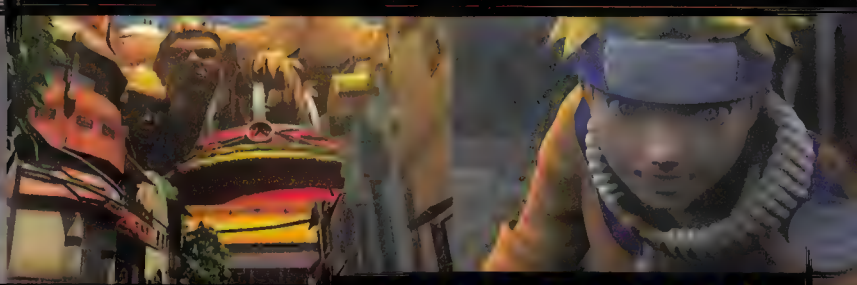

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief
Mild Suggestive Themes
Simulated Gambling

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System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Nintendo	Available	November
Developer	Nintendo	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

The Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess

Shocking newsflash from six weeks ago: Twilight Princess = good!

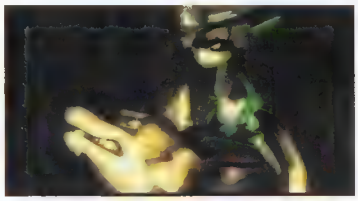
words **Casey Loe**

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time sold five million copies in six months, and has held the title of "highest-rated game in history" for eight years straight. But instead of trying to cash in on that success, the Zelda games that followed tried to differentiate themselves with an unconventional structure (Majora's Mask) and a controversial new art style (The Wind Waker), leaving The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess as the first true heir to what many consider to be the greatest game of all time. That's a difficult legacy to live up to, but Twilight Princess does so admirably, if not quite flawlessly.

Of course, much of Ocarina of Time's legendary status derives from redefining the adventure genre and inventing the first truly functional 3D control scheme. Twilight Princess, on the other hand, is content to evolve Ocarina's ideas without adding anything particularly revolutionary to the genre. To those that consider this to be a fault, I respectfully ask: if making another Ocarina of Time is so easy, how come no one has pulled it off in the last eight years?

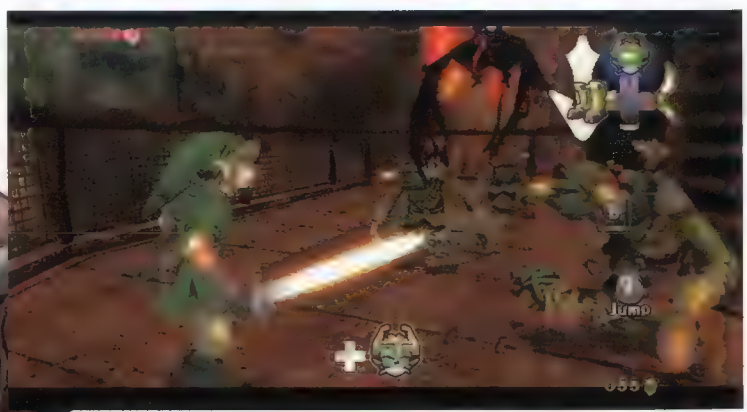
The most noticeable upgrade in Twilight Princess is the volume of content. While the statistics match up pretty closely with Ocarina—it has roughly the same amount of dungeons and a similar total playtime—the size of Hyrule has increased by a factor of ten. It's no coincidence that you begin the game with Epona (the horse) and spend much of your time in the form of a wolf; this world is too vast for two-legged travel. The Ocarina version of Lake Hylia, for example, is a mere puddle compared to the six-map network of lakes and tributaries that compose Twilight Princess's version of the same area.

While Ocarina of Time and Majora's Mask dabbled with scripted events like the Hyrule-sneaking sequence and milk-wagon escort mission, they seem like sad, sloppy mini-games compared to the epic scripted events found in Twilight Princess. The developers clearly put months of effort into crafting massive-scale mounted battles, brilliantly intricate escort missions and dragonback flight sequences that



play out for no more than a few intense minutes a piece. All the message board chatter about whether Twilight Princess is a 40 hour game or a 70 hour game misses the point: Any developer can lengthen their game by adding a bunch of repetitive dungeons or doubling the amount of enemies. But creating a human-scale world and packing it with hundreds of brilliant puzzles, epic battles, optional detours, unexpected events and well-designed mini-games—that is a stunning accomplishment.

The most surprising evolution comes in the game's storyline. While Majora's Mask won praise for its complicated tale and memorable cast of characters, the other games in the series have stuck close to the archetypal Zelda storyline. But the story in Twilight Princess is unexpectedly intricate and thoroughly engaging, without sacrificing any of the storytelling elegance of its predecessors. The tale is told primarily with well-scripted and beautifully rendered event scenes, which are heavy on action and light on dialogue. Twilight Princess is one of the finest examples of elegant storytelling ever seen in a video game—the story is far more compelling than that of, say,

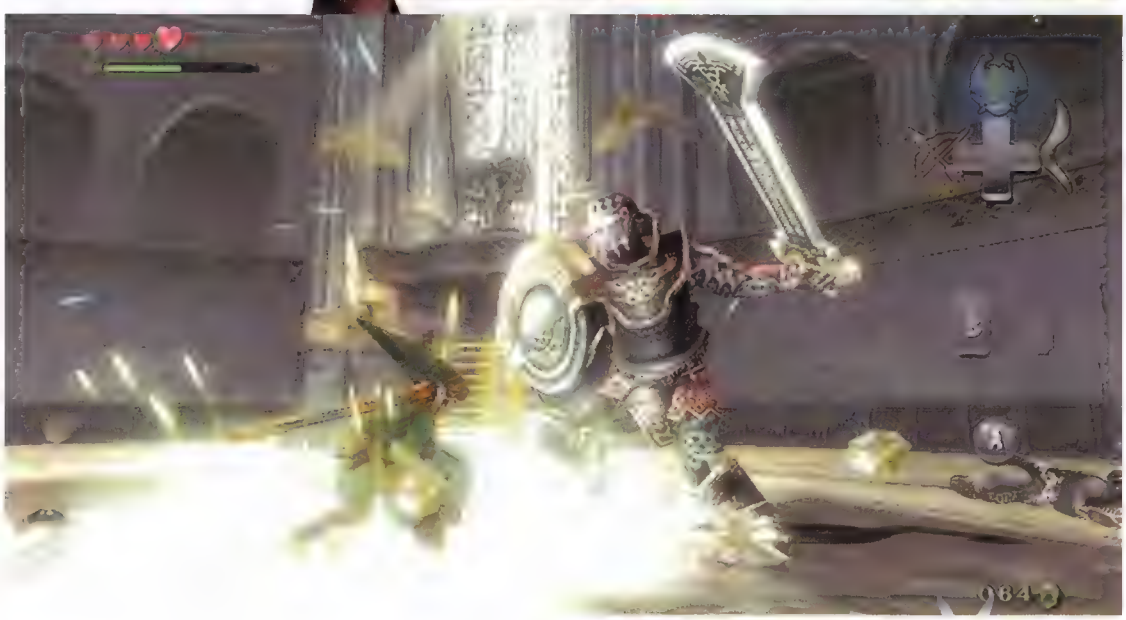


"...the story in Twilight Princess is unexpectedly intricate and thoroughly engaging..."

Final Fantasy XII, and yet it is told with perhaps 1/50 of the volume of text.

Finally, Twilight Princess offers the most refined dungeon design the series has ever seen. While many games have imitated the pacing and structure of the Zelda series, no other development team has managed to come close to crafting its endless supply of satisfying and innovative puzzles. Twilight Princess puts clever twists on many well-loved items and dungeon gimmicks from past games, and also offers scores of completely new ones. The puzzles never get as frustrating as they occasionally did in Ocarina of Time and Majora's Mask, but are much more challenging than the anemic batch in The Wind Waker. Nearly all are set at that perfect level of difficulty where the answers aren't immediately obvious but aren't so elusive as to be frustrating. The dungeons will keep your brain humming from start to finish as only a great Zelda game can.

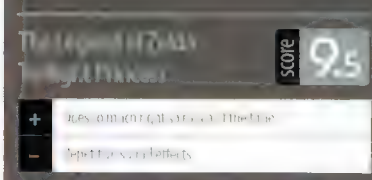
The calm before the storm or in this case, twilight.



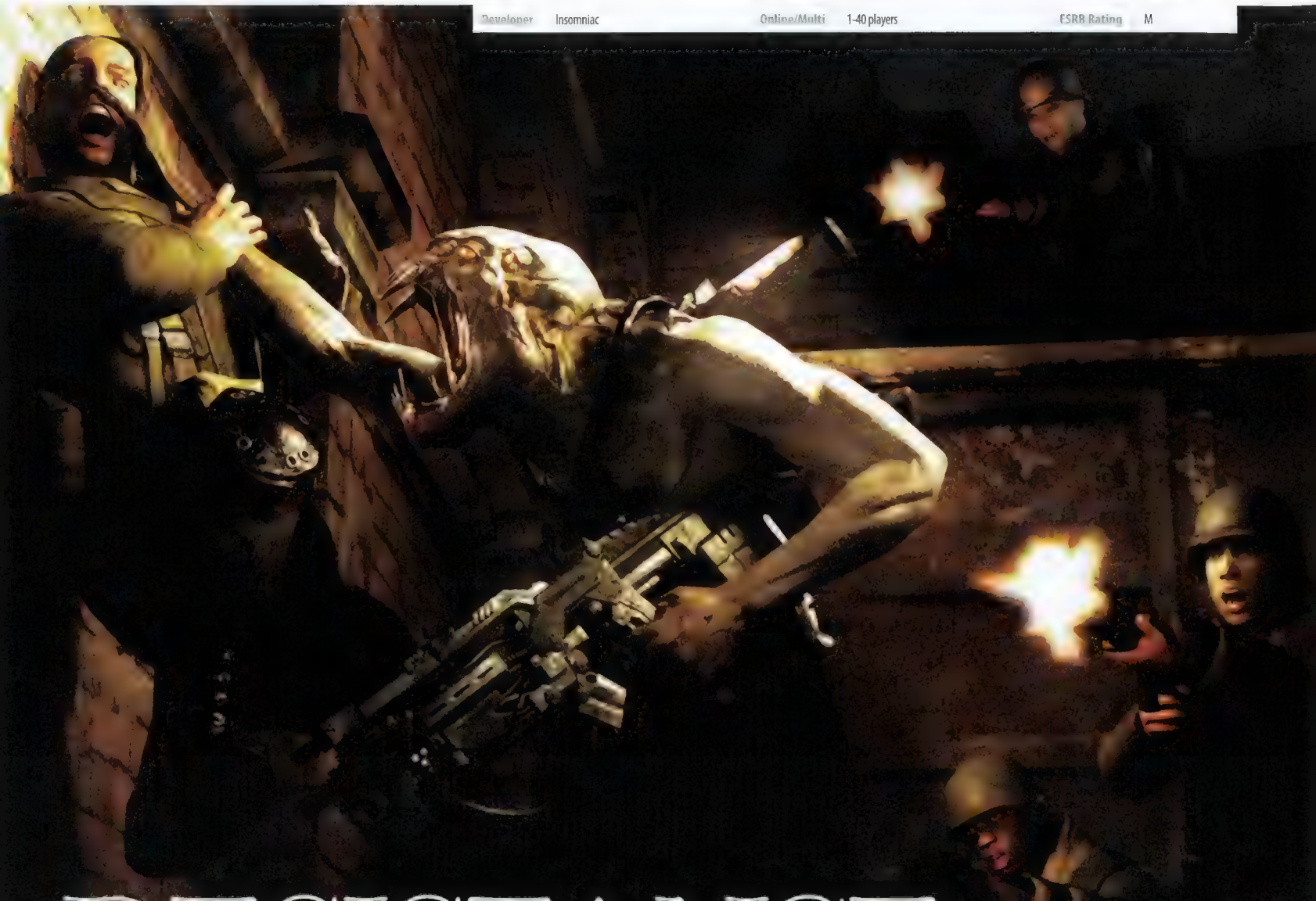
While my heart tells me that Twilight Princess is a perfect 10, it has a few too many flaws to justify that. While the Wiimote enhances the controls in many ways, having to shake your hand back and forth to use basic attacks gets old fast and detracts from the feeling of precision you'd expect from the series. I know some people feel differently, and that's great, but Nintendo should have at least provided the option to map basic attacks to the A button. The controls break down further when it comes to the camera. Instead of allowing you to pan around without changing your perspective (which The Wind Waker allowed you to do, as well as nearly every other 3D game released in the last five years), Twilight Princess only allows you to control the camera in the first-person view mode. This camera scheme was revolutionary when it debuted in Ocarina of Time, but after The Wind Waker it's a painful step backwards for the series. To add insult to injury, the GameCube version supposedly still has the free camera controls, making the Wii version inferior in a significant way.

Twilight Princess has moments of breathtaking beauty, but there are times when it looks flat-out horrible, especially when the low-res wall textures fill your screen with giant, blown-out pixels. I suppose uneven graphics are something we'll have to get used to on the Wii, but there is absolutely no excuse for the soundtrack. Don't get me wrong—the music is great. But you'll only hear it during event scenes, major battles, and other quest milestones. The other 95% of the time you'll hear nothing but repetitive and annoying ambient sounds. When indie RPGs that sell 50,000 copies can have four-disc soundtracks full of great music, what possible reason could the Zelda team have for being so stingy with the tunes?

I don't think Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess will manage to duplicate the legendary status of its predecessor, but it has already managed to accomplish a similarly impressive feat: hundreds of thousands of people bought a $250 Wii just to play it three weeks early, and no one seems to regret it. By the time you're reading this, such drastic actions won't even be necessary—you can pick up a GameCube version for $50, and there is absolutely no reason you shouldn't. Twilight Princess is not without faults, but they don't get in the way of the call-in-sick and play-it-till-your-eyes-dry-out gaming immersion that is the hallmark of a truly exceptional game. **play**



System(s)	PS3	Publisher	Sony	Available	November
Developer	Insomniac	Online/Multi	1-40 players	ESRB Rating	M



RESISTANCE

Fall of Man

words **Brady Fiechter**

A new look at the fury of WWII

Resistance: Fall of Man possesses a quality very few games I've played this year do: that driving factor to play to the end, without breaks, without needing to walk away from that unsettling sense of monotony to reinvigorate the desire to jump back in for the next session. There are a number of outstanding qualities exhibited by this worthy launch PlayStation 3 first-person shooter, and its keen sense of pacing and unique magnetism are just a few that make it one of the year's best.

Resistance does begin on a dour note, establishing itself as what would seem to be a World War II shooter with aliens. Insomniac has always opened its games with simpler, tutorial-leaning levels that serve as warm ups for the mania to come, but here, the fallout of familiarity takes an early toll.

No matter. The game quickly takes off, firing on full throttle as one spectacular set piece after another drives home unending moments of engaging shootouts with Chimera alien scum. Because Resistance is based in a fictional reality in England, imagining what would happen if our World War II never occurred, the aliens that replace Nazi resistance afford an interesting artistic liberty to the action, weapons, and environments. Insomniac demonstrates a fantastic flair for the dramatic, falling short more in mood than setting and spectacle. When the game is on, there isn't much out this year to compare. But when it's off, the blame sets squarely in a lack of identity. It's all still a little too safe and by-the-numbers in some key areas that deserve more imagination—especially given the strength of the theme. Insomniac has done better.

But not much better with the action, which doesn't feel like every other FPS experience before it. Enemy patterns work around placement and a web of weapons fire as much as raw intelligence, combining for awesome stretches of intensity and skill. The scale of the battles is at times immense—perhaps no game has established such a scope of warring—and at other times intimate, closed-quarter affairs of nerve and mood. The balance of space, color, texture and adrenaline is masterfully structured.

Continuing their love of multiple weapons and the strategic weighting of each one, Insomniac infuses Resistance with 16 varied boomsticks, each offering a touch of power and accuracy and efficacy distinct from the last. Eight are available through the first play through, with highlights including the Auger—a high-energy rifle that drills through solid objects and sets up a transient shield in its alt-

fire mode. Grenades are fairly standard, leaving the Hedgehog for the standout: a burst of spikes annihilates anything in its path with a delicious THUMP! sound.

It's important to note how much Resistance plays like a classic video game, mixing modern notes with old fashioned sensibilities. Even the look of the game could be misperceived as inferior, but look closely, and you see details in animation, effects and level design that draw few comparisons. It is a game as unique as it is sometimes banal.

The driving segments, environmental stiffness—so much does move and bend that the things you'd expect to follow suit stand out in error—and limp story take a toll on the greater whole of the experience. But in the end, what an experience it is. Like Gears of War—and here's one of the few comparisons the two games perhaps deserve—there is a core soul to the game, a high level of energy and charisma and artistic triumph that smothers the obvious chunks of inadequacy. Very few games allow you to see and experience so much, and for that, Resistance: Fall of Man is that much more worthy of praise. And in the end, Insomniac reached their goal: the game is just absolute "fun." **play**

Resistance: Fall of Man

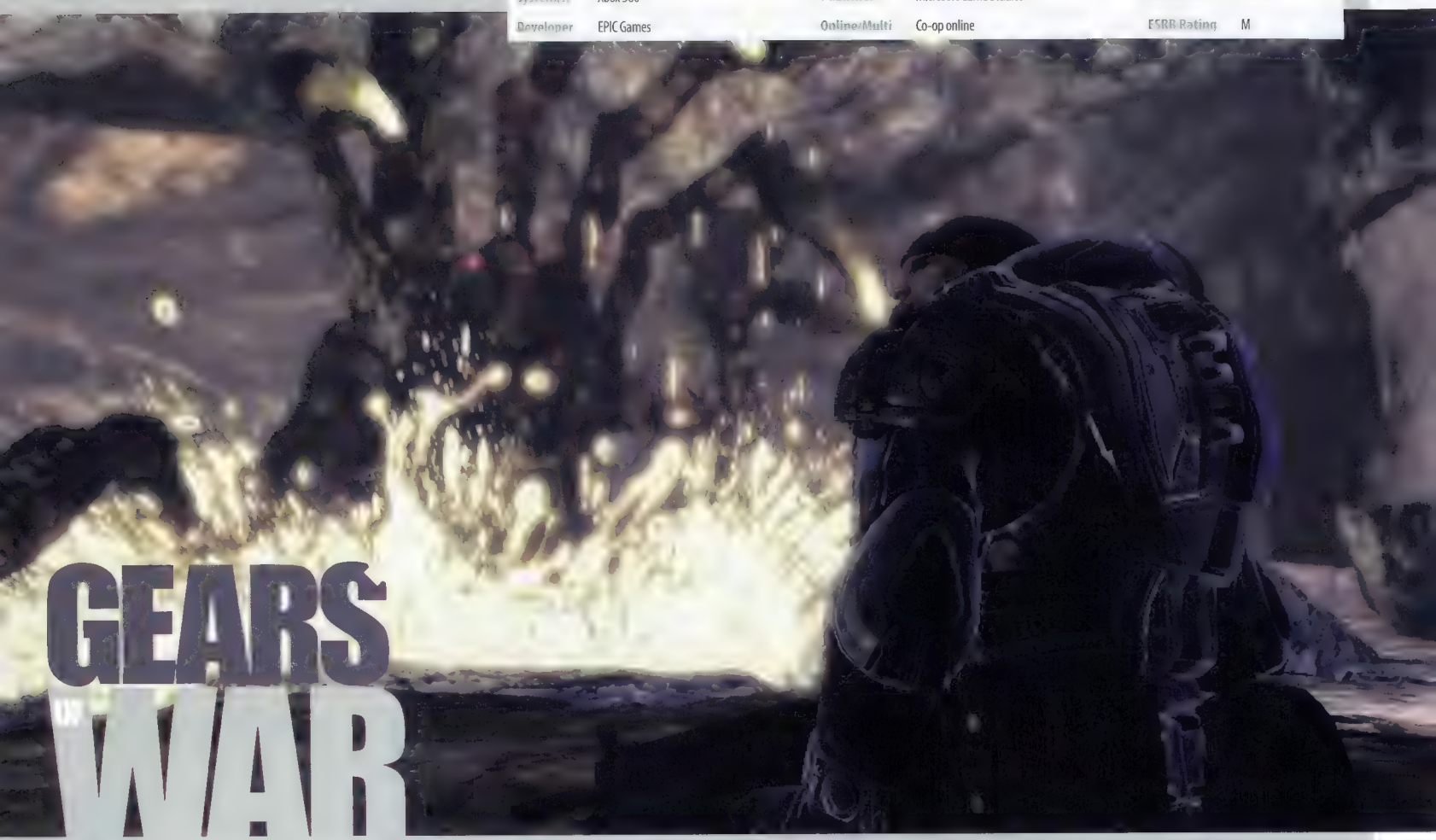
score 9.0

+

-

"...its keen sense of pacing and unique magnetism are just a few that make it one of the year's best."

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios	Available	Now
Developer	EPIC Games	Online/Multi	Co-op online	ESRB Rating	M



GEARS OF WAR

Would you like to know more?

words **Dave Halverson**

A true blockbuster is universal—no matter your preference in genre, for a game to achieve legendary status it must transcend genres and appeal to everybody. Few games have achieved this: Zelda, Metroid, Final Fantasy, Resident Evil, and Halo spring to mind. There is no longer a universally beloved platformer (my genre of choice) save for perhaps Mario (although the near perfect *Sunshine* was flogged by many) and until now, in my estimation, there wasn't a third person shooter—let alone a squad based one—that even came close. You can scream Tom Clancy all you want, but that's people killing people and thereby limited to players who find that entertaining to the tune of "legendary". You can now ad Gears of War to that illustrious and short list; Microsoft's second brand worthy of its own day.

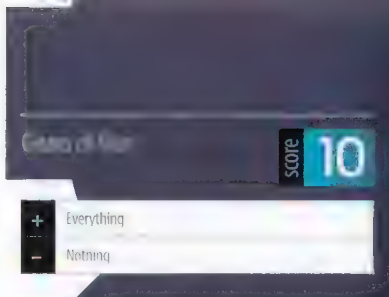
Before I get into the gameplay it must be said that whether you agree with my views or not there is no denying that this is one of, if not thee most well constructed games ever. There was a limited edition book awhile back called "Destroyed Beauty" which, although filled with gorgeous concept art, I didn't grasp until now. That name say's it all. The world in Gears of War is demolished, but at the same time utterly beautiful because it doesn't look fabricated. It looks like our world would if it fell under such an attack. The detail is absolutely outstanding. It's painfully evident that EPIC poured their hearts into every staircase, floor, ravaged ceiling, obliterated structure, clogged artery, vehicle, puddle, and cavern in the game. But this is only the facade on which the game resides. No matter how beautiful, so many other elements need to click; and here, they bellow. The cinematography, pacing, script, and AI, do their parts as well. The single player campaign certainly begins as superb duck 'n cover, but duck 'n cover a great game does not make. They elevate there's by allowing the player a diverse move set from the position, but soon evolve beyond the norm via weapons technology (I'm trying to do this without spoiling the game) and level interaction that elevates it from a shooter to so much more. Things go from manic, to eerily quite, to horrific to pant wetting…and the dialogue supports it all in stride, as do the in-game pans and zooms, and the cut scenes. You live this game; you care about your squad and when you're offered a choice of routes

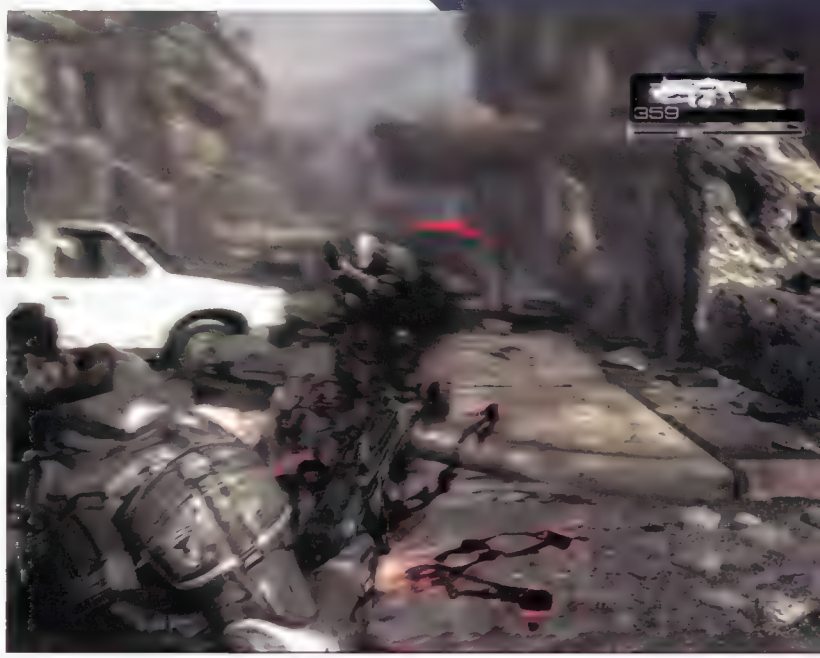
Somebody up there loves you, and it's not Direct TV.

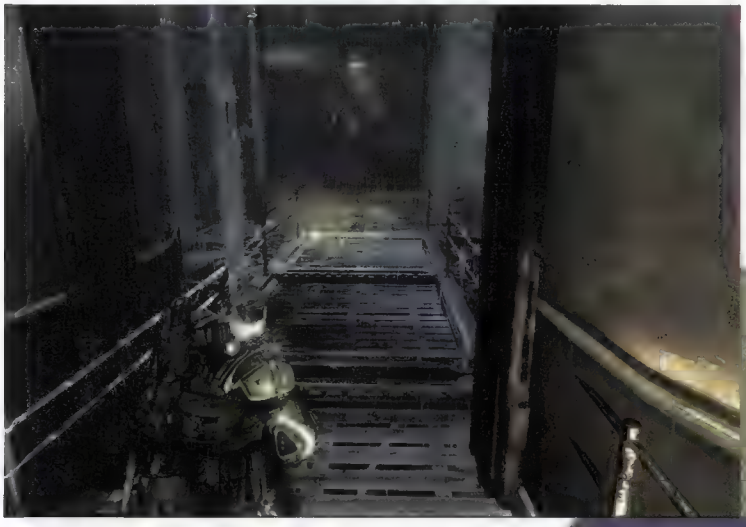
you think long and hard about what awaits you depending on the choices of terrain. Tight corridors and open streets both pose formidable yet different challenges. You will die and you will use your head to overcome certain situations. If you find you're self plugging away but dying repeatedly, look around. EPIC has built a non linear world into a linear adventure. They utilize not only day and night but the world in a way I've never experienced. I've seen multiple paths and evolving gameplay before, just never at this level. Gears of War is truly a breakthrough: The absolute finest game of its kind. The bar has officially been raised. What Halo did for first person shooters, Gears does for third person—it's that good. If this is where this genre is heading my repertoire will be growing, but I'm not holding my breath. There's stuff in here that will stay with you long after the shooting stops.

As for everyone's fave caveat, length; again, not to spoil anything, this greatly relies on your skill level, but I will say that like Symphony of the Night, when you think it's over—just as you're about to say "my god, that was intense but I want more dammit!"—that's exactly what you get, and I'll leave it at that. There's also going back through on the two ladder settings, and of course multi-player galore; somewhere I don't go. I live for the single-player experience and I'd gladly pay 60 dollars for the campaign alone. I can't believe the level of entertainment 60 dollars can still buy. Video games truly are in a class by themselves when it comes to the entertainment dollar, especially when they are of this exalted nature. I know that sounds arrogant from someone that gets game's for free but I'll buy Gears for many a holiday gift (well, maybe not mom) if not give my comp copy to a deserving staffer and buy my own as I often do. I still love buying games when I know I'm supporting a developer that has gone to such extraordinary lengths to entertain on every level: Speaking of which the soundtrack and sound effects are on par with everything else.

Before I go I have to add one more thing. I've seen and done things I never imagined in Gears (as a Starship Troopers fan I've lived a dream) but one thing in particular stopped me dead in my tracks, and that's the rain. I won't try to describe it; just look down. **play**

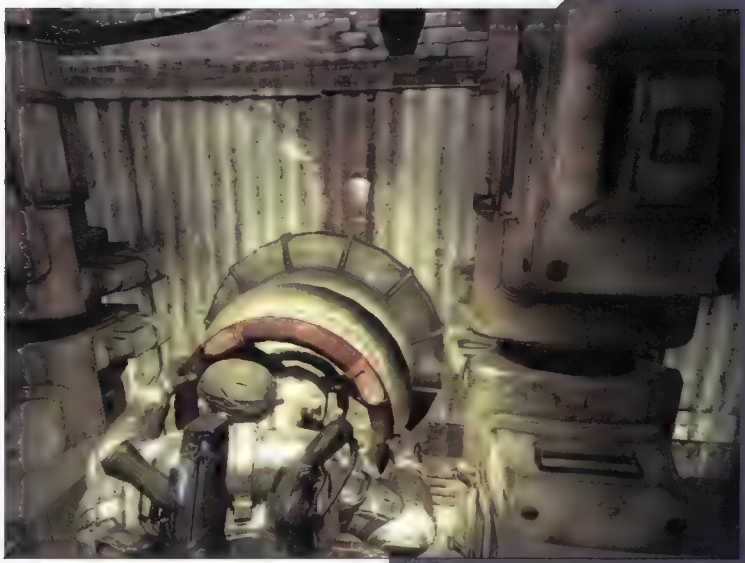






"Gears of War is truly a breakthrough: The absolute finest game of its kind. The bar has officially been raised."

Check the water splashing off the shoulder...that's detail.



System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Bandai-Namco	Available	Now
Developer	Namco	Online/Multi	1-14 player	ESRB Rating	E

RIDGE RACER 7

No reference to "Rrriiidge Raaacerrr!" will be made in this strapline

Nick Des Barres

[redacted]

I just wanted to get that off my chest. 60fps 1080p is astounding. it's the best thing Ridge Racer 7 has going for it, because the game itself, barring the nifty "always-on" online component, is identical to last year's Ridge Racer 6. But you know what? That's not such a bad thing: Ridge offers a simple, infinitely well thought-out gameplay experience that succeeds in a way more complex games cannot: The sheer delight of satisfactory video game cause-and-response is at its height in Ridge's magical Drift System, a control scheme so ludicrous (and yet so singularly perfect) that no other producer of racing games would dare copy it. If you've somehow avoided the series over the last decade-and-change, it essentially amounts to tapping the brake button before sliding into hairpin turns, sending your machine careening at physically impossible speeds into a predetermined drift that, quite simply, makes you feel like a champion. Like painfully few other modern driving games, Ridge doesn't try to pretend to

"I just wanted to get that off my chest. 60fps 1080p is astounding."

be "real": It's a driving simulacrum, not a driving simulation.

For this reason, Ridge Racer 7 succeeds at something today's racing games fail: The creation of euphoria. Playing Ridge simply *feels good*. Landing the perfect drift, even if it requires little actual skill, is a gaming experience that stands alone. Perhaps akin to the execution of a quality combo in a fighting game, it offers instant and powerful gratification. Wisely, Namco decided not to dilute this pure gaming quintessence with a plethora of extraneous new features, merely expanding the nitro system, first introduced in Ridge Racers, into various distinct types, and adding an almost inconsequential slipstreaming mechanic (stay in the region of the draft behind drivers ahead of you to reduce drag and thus get a speed boost). An option to play with the SIXAXIS's tilt feature as steering is also available, but I urge you to steer clear. Perhaps it's just me, but I spent far too much time trying to come to grips with it, hoping it would offer a groovy alternative to the analog stick. Unfortunately, it offers only pain.

While the core gameplay experience remains largely the same, the shell wrapped around it has changed significantly. The traditional one-player campaign mode (as usual netting you the "ending" with credits about halfway through you actually complete all the challenges) is present, though the game is now always online, with rankings and messages from top players displayed constantly. This creates a true feeling of community -- call it MMOR, if you like. Online racing is quick, fun and free, and is without question the finest new feature the game has to offer. The final new major gameplay component comes in the form of extensive car customization, with each of the 40-odd base cars ("special" and bonus concept cars do not share this feature) sporting a vast array of spoilers, tires, hubcaps, transmissions, nitro systems, paint jobs, decals...the list is virtually endless, allowing for literally tens of thousands of combinations.

Looks spectacular in motion...

In terms of available tracks, there are plenty. There are *more* than plenty, compared to most modern racing games, each available in backwards and mirrored versions as well. This is, of course, a Ridge Racer legacy feature; only a handful of courses are actually *new*, though all are remodelled and retextured in next generation style. Legacy tracks are largely based on their Ridge Racer 6 versions, with slight tweaking here and there in the form of different textures and effects. The six all-new tracks are jaw-droppingly gorgeous, most designed with an Asian theme in mind -- something new for the series. Mist Falls, Lost Ruins and Shadow Caves offer jaunts through Southeast Asian-inspired deep jungle locales, while Industrial Drive, Bayside Freeway and Old Central have you hurtling through densely-packed Hong Kong/mainland China-esque cityscapes.

Sonically, Ridge Racer 7 is essentially unimpeachable. It is the most extensive Ridge Racer soundtrack yet, boasting tracks from the "Sampling Masters" Ayako Saso, Shinji Hosoe and Nobuyoshi Sano (original creators of the series sound aesthetic), as well as countless tracks by both up-and-coming and established dance music artists from throughout the world. In addition, extra tracks can be downloaded from the PlayStation Network and accessed through the game's "Net Disc", though as of press time the feature is not yet available and will reportedly not be free. Techno, house, drum 'n' bass, hip-hop, almost all refreshingly old-school -- the soundtrack CD cannot arrive soon enough.

Ridge Racer 7 is beautiful. It's in 1080p. It provides that sense of exhilaration only true arcade racing games can. The music is fantastic. Overall, it's probably the best Ridge Racer ever made. There's just one problem -- it recycles far too much from Ridge Racer 6 on Xbox 360. Many have derided the game as "Ridge Racer 6.5", and it's hard to argue with them. It goes without saying we'd never have received a PS3 launch Ridge Racer game without heavy asset recycling, but it's still disappointing. If you played RR6 (and unless you happen to be a *serious* Ridge fan -- as I must admit I am), you may want to skip 7 and hold out for the inevitable next Ridge game on PS3. With that said, however, a several-month PS3 software drought seems to be on its way, and you're gonna have to fill that gap somehow. There are far worse choices than the stimulating Ridge Racer 7. **play**

Ridge Racer 7

score **8.0**

\+ Obscenely high resolution, classic Ridge drama, euphoria, extensive music selection

\- Core gameplay is virtually identical to every other entry in the series, too much recycling from RR6

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios	Available	Now
Developer	Rare	Online/Multi	Multiplayer (2) Content Download	ESRB Rating	E

Viva Piñata

Eye and mind candy

words Dave Halverson

It is every Piñata's dream to be whisked away (or shot out of a large cannon) to a party to be beaten silly. Until then they are in your hands, although in Viva Piñata they return safe and sound.

In Rare's extraordinary gardening/creation game you are lord of the piñatas and purveyor of all you see. Sure, you're just the gardener, but you wield the power to render species to flourish or become extinct; the one and only customer to a village full of vendors anxious to please, and the only thing standing between your new family and their certain demise. It's a lot of power to wield, but they're only papier mache, right? Wrong… not anymore. Now they're your children, or dinner for the new children you hope to attract…

It all begins innocently enough, patting down soil and laying sod, breeding tiny Piñatas like rabbits, but before you know it you're juggling visits to Leafo's shop for seeds and produce—you need Quakberries to get your Pretztails to romance after all—between visits to the local alchemist, hunter (always good in a pinch), builder etc., and your gardening/creation duties...until the sun sets and nightfall ushers in its own passel of ado. Or perhaps you're working to crate up an order for Piñata Central. No matter what you *are* doing I can guarantee you one thing: you and you alone are doing it. No two people will play Viva Piñata alike, even though all who enter will most assuredly become residents for as long as their 360 remains tethered to a wall socket.

Never have I seen a concept so perfectly implemented that a relatively tiny patch of land has me utterly captivated. Viva Piñata truly is a canvas for the player's imagination; a bustling community supporting a universe with rules all its own, where the topography you forage becomes the basis of your worlds evolution. Visually the game is an art form unto itself; richly color-drenched and painstakingly designed to parody each creature's natural state: Every abode and edifice part of a dictionary-thick virtual storybook. Piñatas have distinct breeding (romancing) habits, appetites, vulnerabilities, natural enemies and even get sick. You may find yourself guarding a sick Piñata until the doctor arrives, in fear of approaching Dastardos (Piñata killers) provided you have the money to pay for the heal, or leaving it for dead if

you're low on cash or it's a weekend. Money plays a huge role in the game and there are many ways to get it. From completing tasks per-requested from other Land grabbing all of the coins you can to selling off species. There are so many variables within the world that it would be impossible to describe them all. The important thing is that Viva Piñata is infinitely fun; thoroughly engaging, visually stunning, and for the most part never-ending. I haven't hopped on Live yet to start trading but I can see where it would provide yet another layer of addiction. I like the way that Rare worked in the TV series too, just enough to remind us that we're a part of the universe but not so much that you feel like anything is forced.

What began as somewhat of a joke—many a Rare fan shook their heads when the Piñatas came to town, myself included—has become a burgeoning franchise, supported by a peppy TV show and one of the most innovative and unique video games to come along in a very long while. I will register one complaint though, and that's the inability to breed sour (evil) piñatas (I'd love to propagate a demonic garden full of razor toothed piñatas). But who knows, perhaps they're packed away in here somewhere. Bottom line: When you put down your gun (providing you can, as stellar as Gears is) I highly recommend picking up a shovel.

Banjo is next...Life is good. **play**

Viva Piñata

score 9.5

\+ I'm going to say that this is the best simulation creation game ever made

\- Want to breed evil sour pinatas. Maybe next time

Trouble in paradise...He wants candy!

"Never have I seen a concept so perfectly implemented that a relatively tiny patch of land has me utterly captivated."

Untold Legends Dark Kingdom

Rest in pieces

Dave Halverson

It's no wonder that Resistance: Fall of Man has been the star of the PS3 launch. It's got a royal pedigree in Insomniac and almost everybody loves a great next-gen FPS. But what about the rest of us? Or better yet, when the smoke clears what should you feed your hard-earned beast of a console while you wait for Motor Storm and Heavenly Sword? May I suggest Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom? Like Resistance: Fall of Man it doesn't bring all that much new or innovative to the genre beyond next-gen visuals, but in DK's case those bells and whistles sound more like gongs.

Not to say that the game is without new features: the character evolution – between the merchandise interface and enchantments – is deep and rewarding, and a defense gauge and lock-on bolster the combat. Add to that a graceful jump animation complete with the odd spot of platforming and there's plenty of fresh meat on these well-gnawed bones.

It all begins with your trademark SOE outdoor training/prologue, although there is no city or tavern rats to best. Instead it's into the proverbial meat grinder you go, hacking and slashing while familiarizing yourself with the game's simple yet

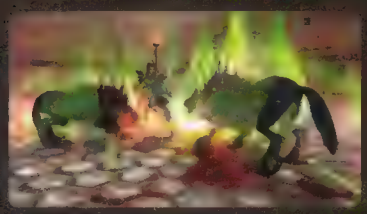
inspired combo system and magic attacks. Be sure to soak in as much detail as possible o'er these sun drenched vistas as you will soon be relegated to fight amidst the living hell that your king-gorie-mad has shaped on your once bountiful kingdom's soil. The cut-scenes that outline the story are often clumsily choreographed; adorned with awkward animation and gangly edits, but that's not why we're here. They are few and far between in Dark Kingdom. This game's majesty lies in its visuals, animation, music, puzzles, balance and god's gift to female warriors, Zala.

The vast majority of Dark Kingdom's gameplay consists of overcoming waves of indigenous evil spirits and their spawn while completing each level's list of goals, such as releasing spirits and activating switches to open your way. This is where SOE shines. The execution is outstanding in relation to where your characters' attributes should be and a deft grasp of the game's defensive, magic, and melee skills, creating a rhythm between player and character in concert with SOE's other master craft: ambience. If this isn't the soundtrack of the year I'll eat sushi, and the environments are absolutely gorgeous, adorned with extensive normal-mapping and shimmering elements. The special

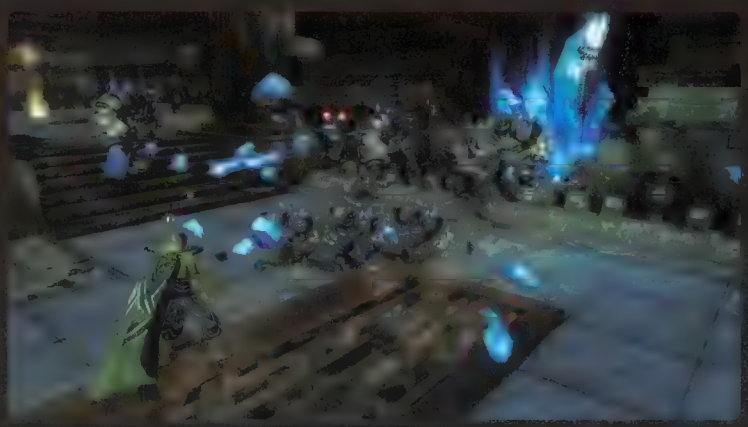
"To say that Dark Kingdom is the whole package in its class would be an understatement."

effects follow suit. Spells and projectiles carry an eerie glow and the clashing of blades is crisp and accurate. Finally, the bosses do not disappoint; ranging in size and technique they fall like flies at the outset but become ruthless adversaries by game's end. To say that Dark Kingdom is the whole package in its class would be an understatement.

The only variable I can think of in relation to your personal experience—a caveat which has become paramount with the advent of the system—is what you play Dark Kingdom on. I played via HDMI on a 42-inch Sony plasma. I can't even imagine playing the game via the standard AV cables supplied with the system. I think that can be said across the boards. The PS3 isn't better with component or HDMI, it demands it. **play**



Sometimes it's better to run....



Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom score **8.5**

+ Physics-based combat heightens the experience tenfold, phenomenal music and architecture

– Waterfalls are last-gen, cut-scenes lack fluidity. Voice acting is a put-off

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Sega	Available	December
Developer	Pseudo Interactive	Online/Multi	1-8 player	ESRB Rating	T

Full Auto 2 Battlelines

words **Brady Fiechter**

As a lightly improved sequel to this year's car-carnage racer on Xbox 360, the PlayStation 3-exclusive Full Auto 2: Battlelines looks better, plays better, feels better… just enough to please current fans of the series, yet further bore the haters.

One of the changes I quite like is the improved balance of the boost power and unwreck feature, which share accumulated juice to perform their individual functions. Instead of being able to use both practically at will, deciding which is more important to utilize at key moments in a race is more important. You're still forced to destroy anything that moves and doesn't move in front of you to properly win a race and rack up points for a padded victory, but a little more strategy is welcome in a game that tends to need it.

Full Auto 2: Battlelines comes strapped with the same problem as Full Auto: it's fun to a point, but there's not enough juice in the tank to keep you thrilled for extended sessions. The online play does help, offering several capable modes to entertain when the single-player sessions run their course.

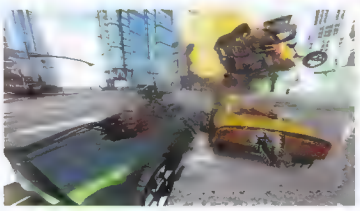
Also new this time out are the arena battles, which play like a Twisted Metal, minus the personality and heavy visceral charge. These sections of destruction-derby carnage do a good job of cutting out the monotony of the straight battle races.

There's plenty of gameplay here regardless, with several dozen sections to destroy your way through and new cars and weapons to open along the way. While the game does feel a lot like the original, Full Auto 2: Battlelines brings just enough newly tweaked weapons and vehicles to the table, mostly improved and more fun to take to the destructive streets.

It's overall just a better, more capable package, nondescript as it may be. **play**

Full Auto 2: Battlelines

score 7.0



Yes, there will be destruction.

" You're still forced to destroy anything that moves and doesn't move in front of you..."

The Countdown has begun...

Rocket is ready to launch!

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SAMPLE COVER

System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	Now
Developer	Ubisoft Montpellier	Online/Multi	1-4 player	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Rayman

Raving Rabbids

words: Dave Halverson

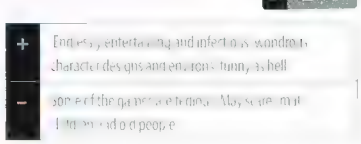
"Thankfully, although Rayman Raving Rabbids follows the party game formula, it's really more of a party for one..."

My idea of a "party" has never involved sitting in a confined space with 3 friends fiddling around with a gaggle of mindless button mashers deemed "party games". I prefer the kind of parties you pay for the next day. Thankfully, although Rayman Raving Rabbids follows the party game formula, it's really more of a party for one, making it okay in my admittedly off-kilter book. You can certainly play multiplayer, as you unlock chunks of the story mode, but I don't see the point, as playing a lot of these games over with "a friend" seems like a hollow, if not somewhat dorky endeavor. Better to go back through solo in score mode scouring for bonuses. Does that mean that Raving Rabbids fails as a "party" game? I think so...but I don't think that's what Michel Ancel and company set out to achieve.

Raving Rabbids is at its best as a single-player game performed solo or in front of onlookers unaware of Montpellier's twisted sense of humor or what the heck a "Wii" is. Remote and Nunchuk in hand, if nothing else Raving Rabbids is a litmus test in Wii-ology. The game uses every trick in the book and does so in a fractured yet cohesive manner, via a nifty little story mode. This may be the first single-player sketch comedy game in history. There are highs; such as the first-person plunger assaults. Lows in a handful of vignettes better skipped (if only you could) and plenty of in-betweeners within the deep grab bag of Rabbid-infested interactive games that no matter how engaging will result in anyone within earshot laughing their asses off. So much of Raving Rabbids's appeal lies in its presentation that it might not work so well if not for the truly bent team that cobbled it together...But these folks know how to let their hair down.

Would I rather have a traditional Rayman platforming sequel on the Wii? Of course; but I'll get that eventually (and hopefully with Rabbids). But in the meantime I will relish the opportunity to entertain myself or who knows, perhaps some party guests, with a toilet plunger and a little help from my fiendish little fuzzy friends.

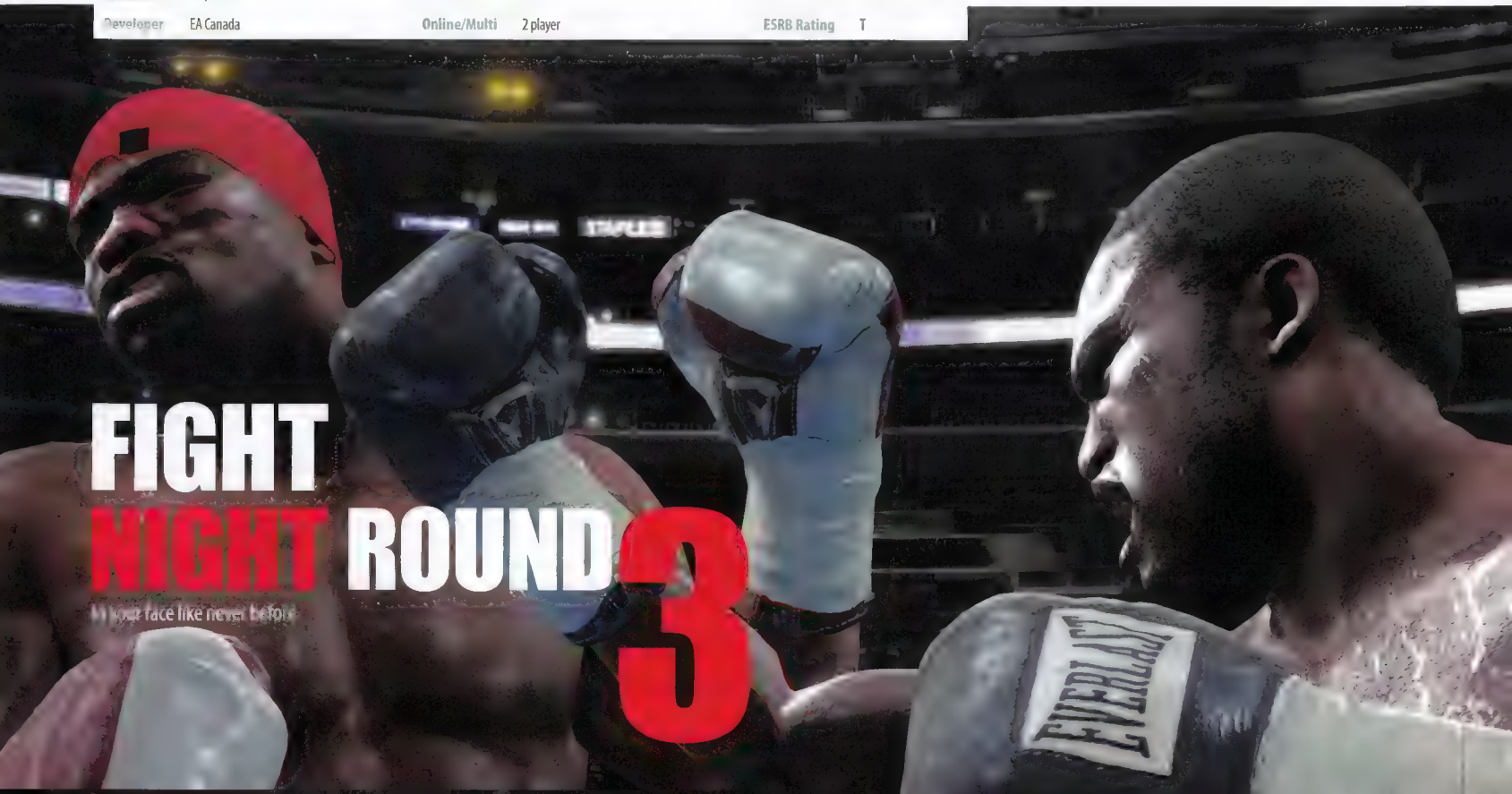
Rayman Raving Rabbids score 8.5

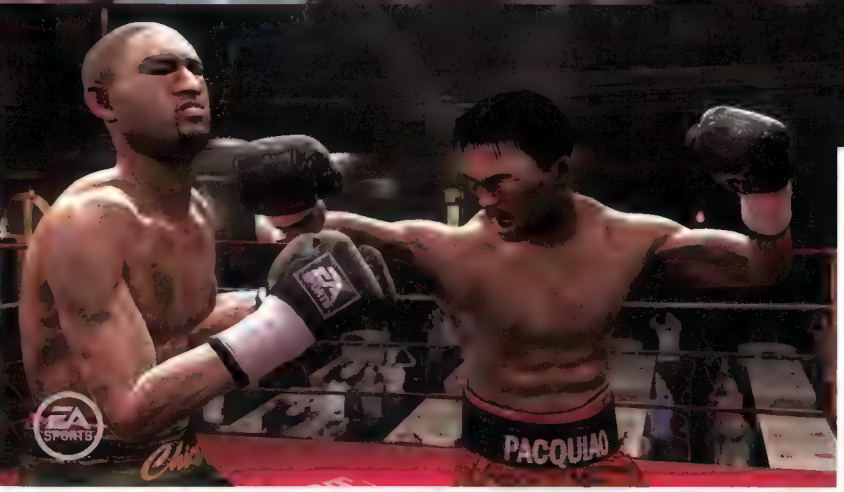


System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	EA	Available	December
Developer	EA Canada	Online/Multi	2 player	ESRB Rating	T

FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3

Mixed face like never before





words Brady Fiechter

No sports game looks as good as Fight Night Round 3. When the boxers first appear in the character-select area, practically displaying details down to the reflective film on their frickin' eyeballs, you tend to feel very justified to have plunked down 600 bucks for the next-generation of PlayStation. Well, you'd feel the same thing about the Xbox 360 version, because there aren't many fundamental differences between the two, visually and mechanically, other than the first-person perspective afforded by Get in the Ring mode.

But beyond the rather moot which-is-better comparisons, yes, the game looks amazing, offering boxing fans unprecedented virtual realism, hammering home every bloody blow with accumulated damage and superb animations—bloody and bruised to the point that you feel it through the visual impact alone.

If only it played as good as it looks, we'd have a sports-game classic on our hands. Instead, you get a control scheme that, while communicating the strategy and overall form of boxing, doesn't quite nail the lighting pacing needed to keep the energy levels high. It's big fun jumping into the ring and pounding out moves with the well-placed timing of the analog stick system—the gameplay succeeds on many accounts—but the tactile sluggishness of the control scheme keeps you a step away from full visceral satisfaction. **play**

Fight Night Round 3

score 8.5

+

-

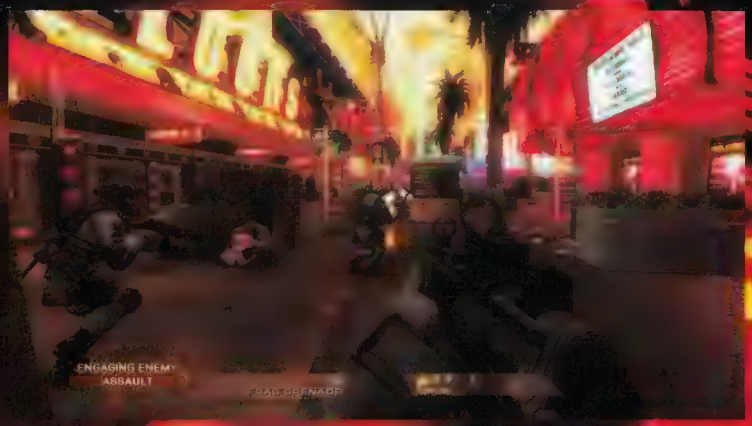
"No sports game looks as good as Fight Night Round 3."

Creepily real...

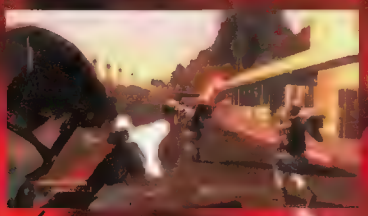
System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	November
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal	Online/Multi	1-16 player	ESRB Rating	M

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas

Tearing apart the Vegas strip, one terrorist at a time



Viva Las Vegas.



"It's a rush to sit outside a room, listen to a group of terrorist strategizing their next move, forced to assess a number of factors..."

Brady Fiechter

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas is one of the few games I've played in which the squad-based gameplay works the way you'd imagine—more engrossing enhancement to the experience than a mechanical dead weight I've come to expect. In this intense, highly conceived tactical shooter, troops respond to your commands efficiently and intelligently. You're not constantly coming across situations where you feel you could pull off the kills on your own. Without the aid of your teammates, you're toast. It's a rush to sit outside a room, listen to a group of terrorists strategizing their next move, forced to assess a number of factors for you and your allies before going in for the kill.

The game is a formidable challenge if you want it to be. Going at it on realistic difficulty really shows the strengths of the tactical system, establishing the finer points of the gameplay and demonstrating just how superior this Rainbow Six is next to its competition. Add in the dynamic of a kick-ass co-op experience—as rewarding as the single-player campaign in its adherence to killer strategy—for maximum replay potential.

However you choose to play Rainbow Six: Vegas, the fictional Vegas sprawl before you always looks incredible. It's hard to fault the superb use of animations, effects and artistic details that permeate the dense environments. The only major area that disappoints is the rather boring liberties that were taken in recreating the Vegas [illegible] casinos and hotels and whatnot, but there's not the grit and sizzle you might expect from a game set in Vegas. We could just as easily be shooting it out in the usual desert for the same effect. What is put to good use is the feeling of dramatic three-dimension space. There's a sense of peril all around you, terrorist crashing through windows, rappelling down ropes, calling out orders as they storm the area.

Buying Rainbow Six with no intention of playing online or co-op would be a waste (think Gears of War). This game comes alive even more within the multiplayer arena, which play a lot like the single-player campaign, only with the human factor ratcheting up the intensity. Most modes are what you've expect, but being able to beef up your personal soldier throughout the advancement of play is a nice touch. play

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas

score 8.5

+ [illegible]

- Another co-op [illegible] Vegas game

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Tecmo	Available	Xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Developer	Tecmo	Online/Multi	1-4 players	ESRB Rating	M

Dead or Alive Xtreme 2

In which the breast man wins

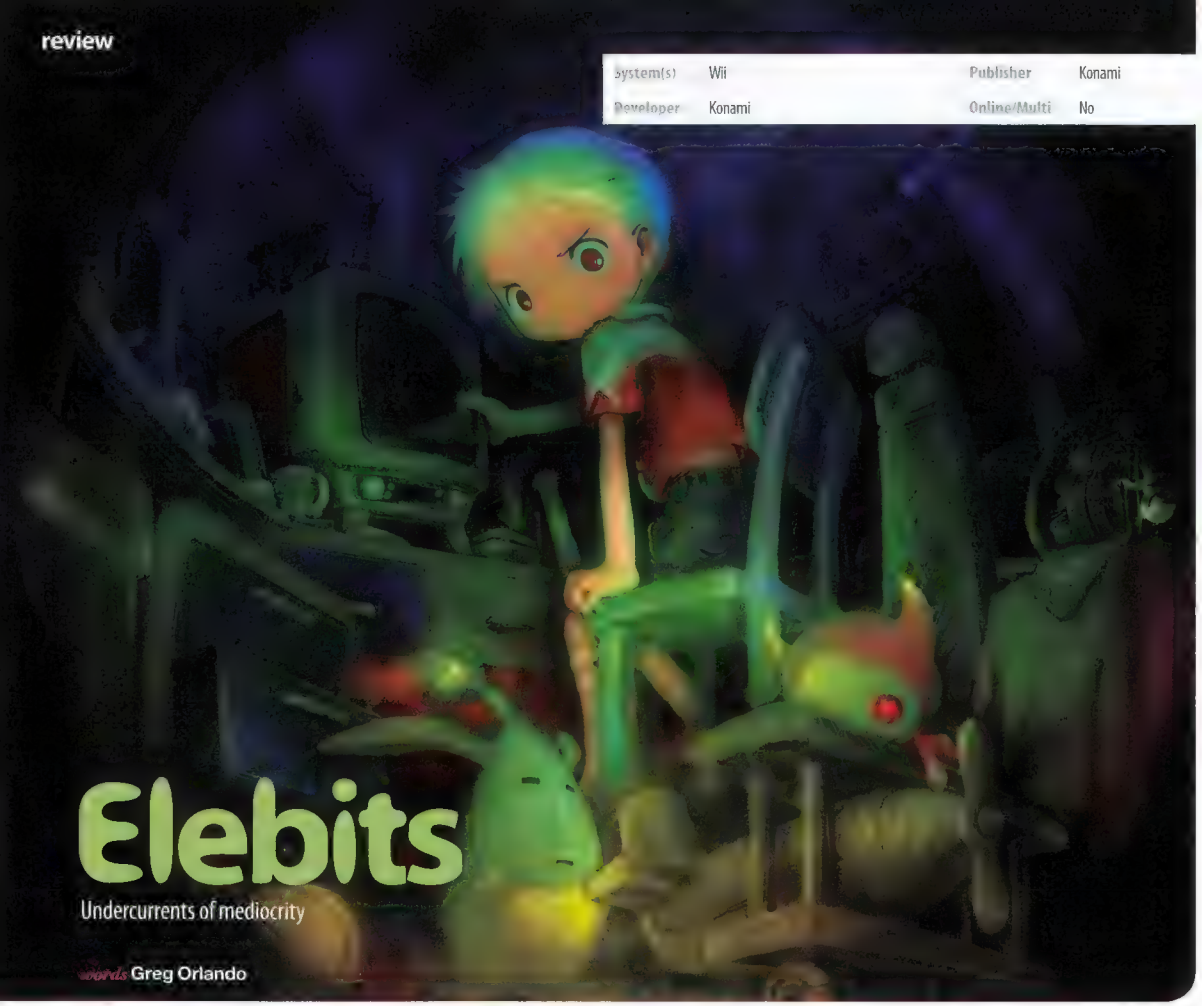
words **Greg Orlando**

"Tecmo knows where its bread is buttered and gives players plenty of bikinis..."

You know you want it.

Dead or Alive Xtreme 2

score 6.5



System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Online/Multi	No
		Available	Now
		ESRB Rating	E

Elebits

Undercurrents of mediocrity

words Greg Orlando

Elebits for the Nintendo Wii delicately blends the action of a first-person lightgun shooter with the fun and excitement of opening up drawers.

A weird and endearing adventure in the vein of Namco's Katamari Damacy, Elebits tells the sad and depressing tale of a young boy abandoned by his scientist parents during a moment of crisis. Strange electricity-producing creatures called Elebits have begun acting out, and now junior is left home alone while mom and dad investigate the mystery.

The story unfolds in gorgeous and stylish painted cut-scenes playing out in between the game's missions. These scenes are notable simply for their beauty, but are also decidedly dark and melancholy in tone; when the game's protagonist wonders aloud if daddy will ever find time to take him to the amusement park, it's one of video games' finest downer moments. The stark contrast between the Elebits' action and its plot seems to suggest that there's a good story to be told about the making of the game, but that, of course, is a matter for another day.

"In terms of its play, Elebits is an elaborate hide-and-seek session..."

In terms of its play, Elebits is an elaborate hide-and-seek session, with players wrecking a suburban house and its outlying environments in order to unearth and capture their prey. Each stage requires the capture of a certain number of watt-producing Elebits in order to reach a power total before a time limit runs out. Later stages tighten the requirements by introducing limitations in the form of breakable objects and noise levels, or attempt to alter the look and feel of rooms and outdoor areas by eliminating gravity.

Objects are manipulated via the Wii's remote. Clicking on an item selects it, and if the player's weaponry is powerful enough, it can be moved, tossed, opened, or hurled. Certain Elebits, when captured, increase the player's gun allowing for heavier items to be moved about; at peak levels, it's possible to toss cars and houses. The problem here is that while wild, sweeping movements are easy to pull off, the ones requiring finesse (as in shifting an item to give a player access to its power switch, or the placement of one item inside another) are most certainly not. Imagine trying to perform neurosurgery with mittens and this should hint at what it's like to put video bread into one of Elebits' toasters.

Players will be pulling out an inordinate amount of drawers, opening a host of cabinets and doors, and manipulating electrical appliances until the video cows come home. They'll also get to insert turkeys into ovens, stuff popcorn into microwaves, and insert disks into shredders, and it must be said Elebits accurately manages to portray the fun inherent in these tasks. Best of all, the game reuses a lot of its environments, offering plenty of opportunity to pull plants from the ground, make coffee, flush toilets, turn on sinks, and clumsily try to manipulate a basketball through a hoop, etc., over and over again.

For those who've ever wanted to experience the manic glee the rock band The Who must have felt when they turned their wrath on many a hotel room, Elebits is a godsend, video manna from the heavens. Others might opt, simply, for hard liquor and a night spent redecorating, which offers the same result and, simultaneously, a greater opportunity for fun. **play**

Elebits

score 5.5

\+ Cute great ps[illegible] scene.

\- Elebits tr[illegible] to make [illegible] video takes [illegible] repeats itself.

4-player Elebits. Stand clear!

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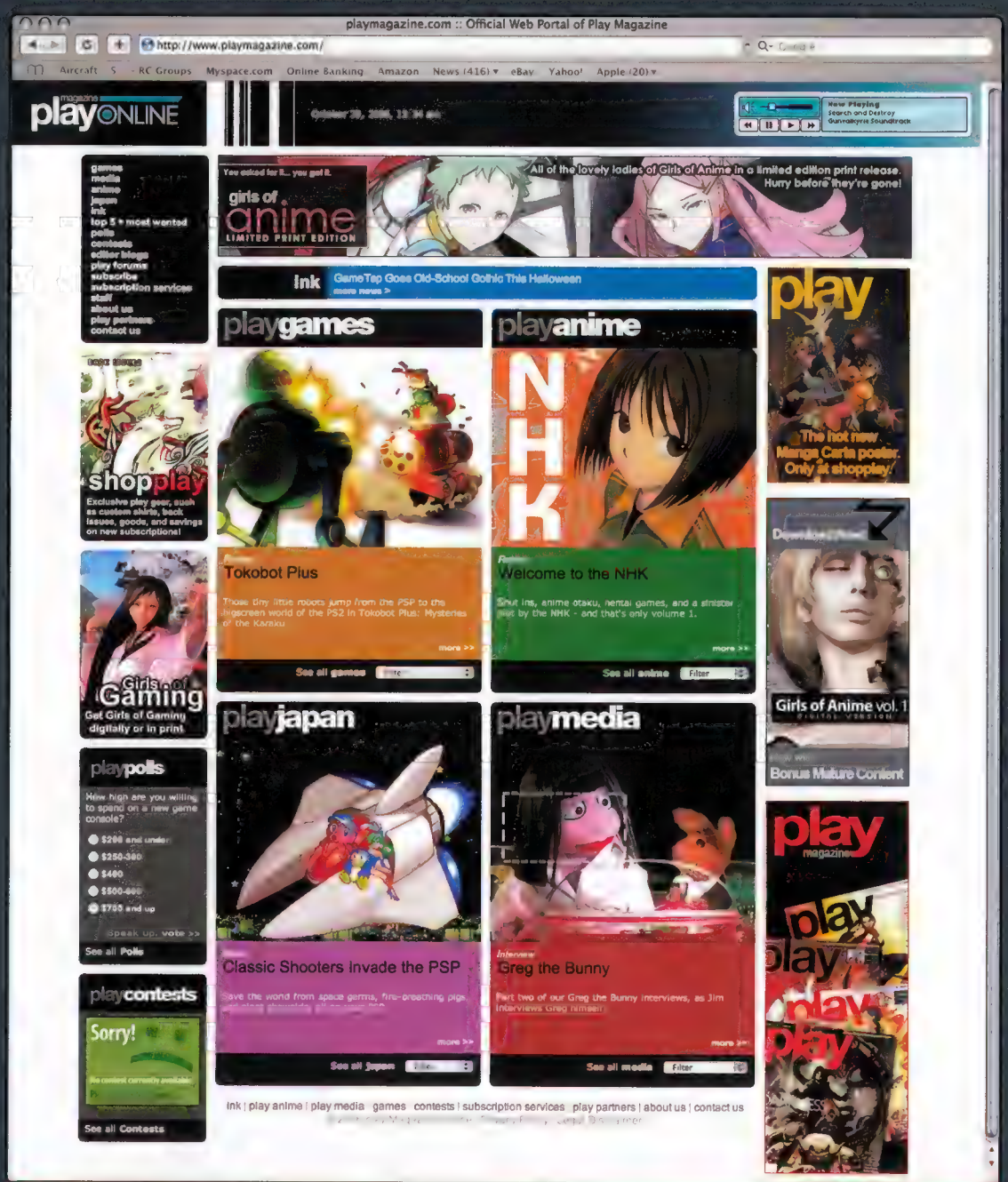
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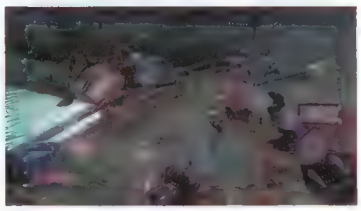
System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SCEA	Available	November
Developer	Game Republic	Online/Multi	1 player	ESRB Rating	T

GENJI

Days of Heavy Heavy

words Brady Fiechter



If only it played as good as it looked...

"It's just too bad the button pounding doesn't allow you to enjoy any finer points."

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, consider Genji: Days of the Blade the painting that hangs on my favorite wall. Lush and beautiful, serene and organic, the game has moments that really must be seen.

That continued to be my attitude throughout the growingly ponderous action: the game really must be seen much more than played. Better served up as a launch game for the PlayStation 2 at best, Genji doesn't belong in the company of modern games that have improved ways of ticking. Never mind the monotony and sludgy pacing; a rigid camera system that feels claustrophobic to the point of detriment tends to rub the most.

There are moments of fun, like crushing boss battles and small platforming sections that cut up the action. The combat is smooth and luscious to the touch, communicating a graceful stroke of programming in the hands of talented gamemakers. It's just too bad the button pounding doesn't allow you to enjoy any finer points.

Four characters are available, joining your party early on in the adventure to, um, save the world from demons. The big lumberer Benkei, stiff and kind of annoying to uses his girth to take down doors and barricades. The elegant female Shizuka is my favorite character, joined by the terrifically animated Yoshitsune and Lord Buson. At the switch of the d-pad, they all plow through a familiar Japanese landscape of ancient mysticism and falling cherry blossoms. Been there many times, but never with such loving detail. Gorgeous.

Combo mini-games are growing bigger these days, and Genji does it decent part of adding to the mix by providing you a slowed-down stretch of super combos when your magic is at full. Here again, a concept is worn down by monotony. Genji is best played, and possibly enjoyed with patience, in chunks. Not the best launch title you'd want, but when you've got little to choose from, you accept. **play**

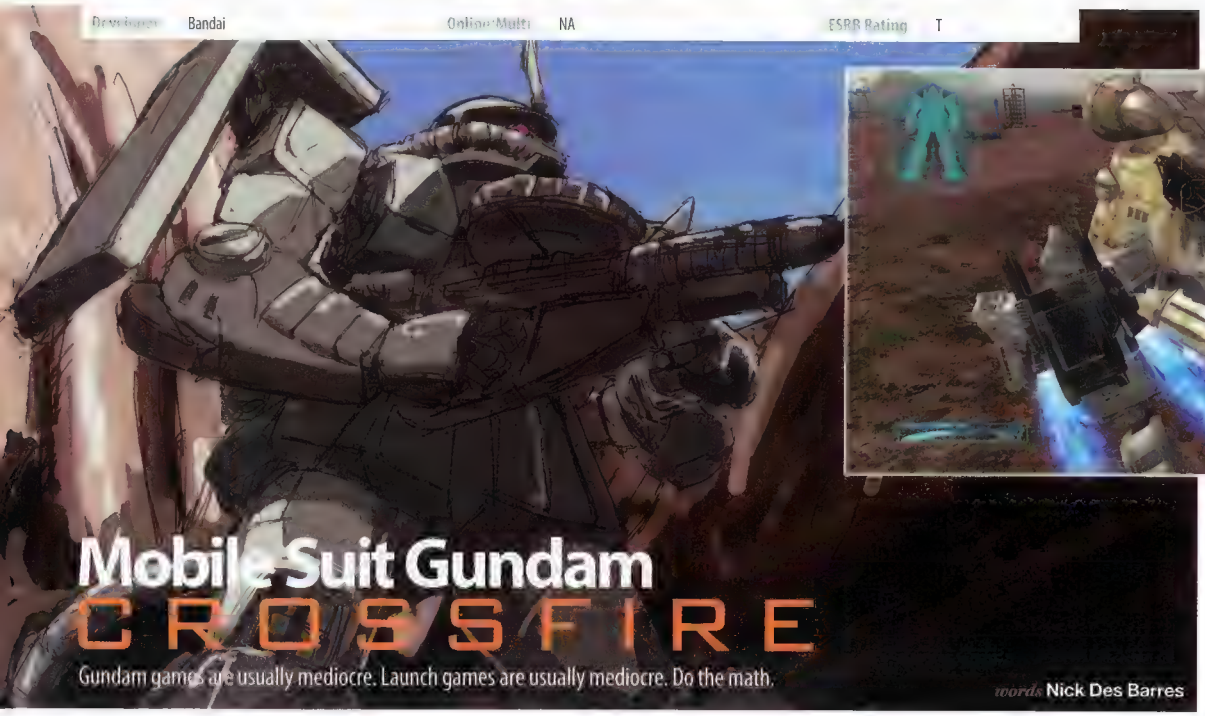
Genji:

score 6.0

+

–

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Bandai-Namco	Available	November
Developer	Bandai	Online Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T



Mobile Suit Gundam CROSSFIRE

Gundam games are usually mediocre. Launch games are usually mediocre. Do the math.

words Nick Des Barres

"The old axiom holds that launch games are mediocre, Gundam games doubly so."

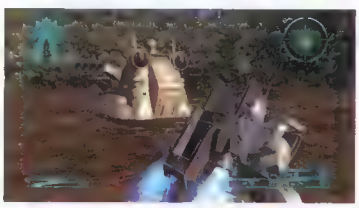
The East/West game criticism divide baffles me. Over here, Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire gets 2s and 3s. In Japan, it got 8s and 9s, not to mention becoming the #1 PlayStation 3 launch best seller. Look, I'm going to tell you it straight: No *way* is this game a 2. On the other hand, it sure isn't a 9, either. I seriously have to question whether or not other reviewers (both Western and Japanese) played the game long enough to find out what it's all about.

And what is it all about? Gundam: Crossfire has you taking control of a nameless Earth Federation or Zeon pilot (two separate scenarios, each with their own exclusive Mobile Suits), performing various inconsequential missions during the very first Universal Century Gundam. This is Crossfire's first mistake: Setting the game so early in series continuity makes the Mobile Suit selection necessarily sparse, with the Federation side getting the hardest hit. Series fans will surely be thinking, "Dude...all they had were GMs, Guncannons, Guntanks, and a Gundam." And you'd be right. Though Bandai dredges up every possible variation of each, including some not strictly canonical, it still boils down to four. The Zeon side fares better, with a wider selection (mad props to controllable Acguys!), though out of a total lineup of 31 Mobile Suits, there are only 13 unique base models.

Such a meagre selection would have been forgivable had the game itself been compelling. Though the individual Mobile Suits models truly are stunning, replete with near-photorealistic weathering and self-shadowing, operating on a laudable design aesthetic that boils down to "what if Mobile Suits were *real*, and not just animated cels?" you just don't get a whole lot to do with them. The "what if Gundam was real" concept seems to be carried over to the controls, resulting in mechs that control like, well, hulking, hundred-ton chunks of metal. Everything just feels slow and clunky, more Chromehounds than ZOE. This may fit in with the "real Gundam" theme, but it doesn't make for compelling gameplay.

Missions consist of tramping around shockingly sparse areas with arbitrary, invisible walls. Despite a legitimately interesting scheme that allows for partial destruction of Mobile Suit parts (blow up an arm wielding a weapon and it becomes unusable, destroy a head and radar no longer functions, take out a leg with a well-placed sniper shot and mobility suffers), everything essentially devolves into brute smashing of mech into mech. While fun on a superficial level, over the space of the lengthy single-player campaigns, it quickly becomes tedious.

The old axiom holds that launch games are mediocre, Gundam games doubly so. Unfortunately, history repeats itself here. The best thing this game has going for it are the absolutely gorgeous 3-D representations of the individual Mobile Suits -- a Gundam fan's wet dream. Sadly, the game itself is utterly and completely average, and background graphics are just not up to PlayStation 3 launch par. The lack of a story -- even though Gundam has one of the most impeccably developed mythologies in anime history -- is also a shame. Why confine us to the reins of a faceless drone when we could have been Char or Amuro? In the final analysis, Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire is just not worth your time...and this is coming from a Gundam maniac. **play**



Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire

score 5.0

System	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	Publisher	Activision	Available	November
Developer	Treyarch	Online/Multi	2-24 player	ESRB Rating	T

CALL of DUTY 3

...the hell of World War II...

Brady Fiechter

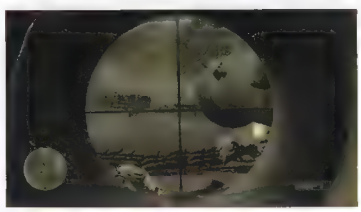
Here we are, once again, dropped into the black heart of World War II. Screaming Germans ("kill the Gerries! Kill them all!") pour out of bomb-scarred houses, barns, trenches and the scorched country side, one after another, the march of death beckoning the added noise and destruction of your Thompson rifle and frag grenades. Explosions and fires and chunks of concrete rain down like fire of Armageddon. It's intense, it's loud, and it's engrossing. It's all what you've come to expect from the Call of Duty series—of any World War II-themed shooter in general.

"It's all what you've come to expect from the Call of Duty series..."

The craft behind Call of Duty 3 is impressive. Treyarch deftly handles the stellar design duties passed on from previous developer Infinity Ward. The misfortune is in the contrived emulation of everything that has come before. Those bombed-out barns and houses and trenches and countrysides carry too much worn-out presence, building a game that's as generic as it is incredibly well made.

When Call of Duty 3 occasionally demonstrates something new, the game really pulls you in. The final quarter of the campaign delivers the action at its best, like when you're fighting through a wine cellar and bursting barrels of alcohol, or darting through a treacherous factory filled with furnaces. And the scene involving shootouts with enemy soldiers fighting above you in sections of broken flooring is awesome.

The inclusion on mini-games of sorts, where you input button routines as you disarm equipment and plant explosive, are a nice touch. In a few unsuspecting, in-your-face tussles with the enemy, the game turns into an unsettling wrestling match of button mashing, ending in the brutal death of the German soldier flipping over rails and crashing through windows. Call of Duty 3 is a bit more violent than you might be used to in a World War II shooter.



There's always room for a jolt of humanity and consciousness in our War Shooters, but Call of Duty 3's attempt for a denser plot than we're used to fails. It would have been nice to fast-forward through the cinemas to get to the point: the Germans are coming again, and their disposal is, for all the familiarity, awfully intense. **play**

(Call of Duty 3)

score 8.5

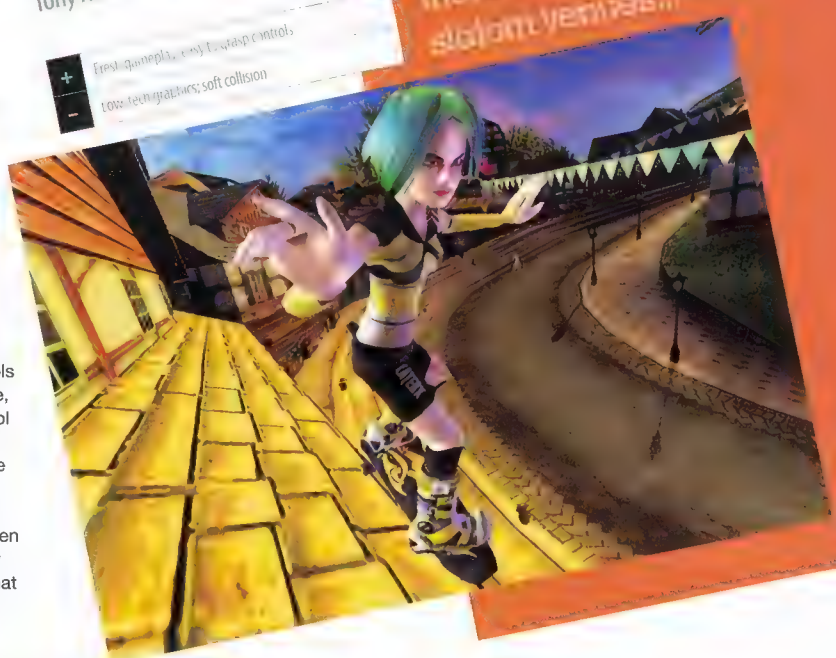
System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Activision	Available	Now
Developer	Toys for Bob/Neversoft	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

TONY HAWK'S DOWNHILL JAM

Going down?

words **Dave Halverson**

This can't end well...



The best thing to happen to the Tony Hawk franchise since free roaming, Downhill Jam is also, if not more so, an introduction to the challenge of re-acclimating oneself to tilt gameplay. Where Excite Truck is ultra-forgiving with its wide aspect courses, THDJ is much more an exercise in precision—precision that is deftly exemplified but initially elusive. Making the skaters go where you want them to takes awhile, let alone throwing down any precision. Thankfully the developers balance things accordingly, easing any frustration via forgiving AI until you've got a handle on things, after which Downhill Jam becomes loads of fun. Essentially an extreme downhill racer in the tradition of SSX, the name of the game in DJ is selecting the skater whose attributes best fit your style and then attacking a series of monster hills weaving through a diversity of set pieces designed for maximum shredding. Tricking, via the Wii remote's D-pad and simple 1-2 button configuration take on a completely new and more cohesive feel as does grinding, flip tricks and freestyle, quelling the series' sequelitus beyond the format change by introducing an altogether more ergonomic feel. If ever a series needed a reboot, this is it.

The crux of the game is racing, although there are also trick and slalom venues which serve double duty as added gameplay or, should you possess the patience, an opportunity to master your technique before tackling the racing; forgoing the learning curve under the duress of competition. Where the game suffers, however, is in having to shake the remote for boost; an annoying bit of spazzing while you're trying to concentrate on the terrain, and in the visuals which although passable by last-gen standards, pale in comparison to even the best GameCube graphics. Normal-mapping, especially on the characters, is sorely missed.

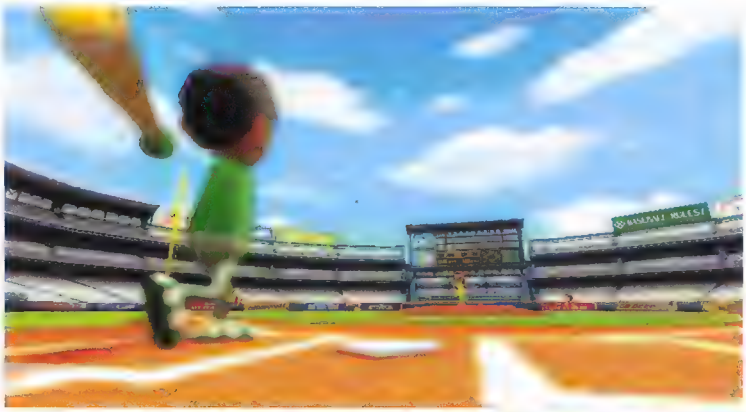
Truth be told, I'd much prefer a next-gen version of Downhill Jam. The controls are novel and fresh, but given the choice, lush visuals easily win out over tilt control for my money. A Six Axis PS3 version would be the ultimate solution. The more Wii I play the more I hope that there's more tech to tap as developers become more comfortable with the hardware. Then again, the system is touted as extremely developer friendly from the get-go, so that may be wishful thinking. **play**

Wii Sports

More than worth the price

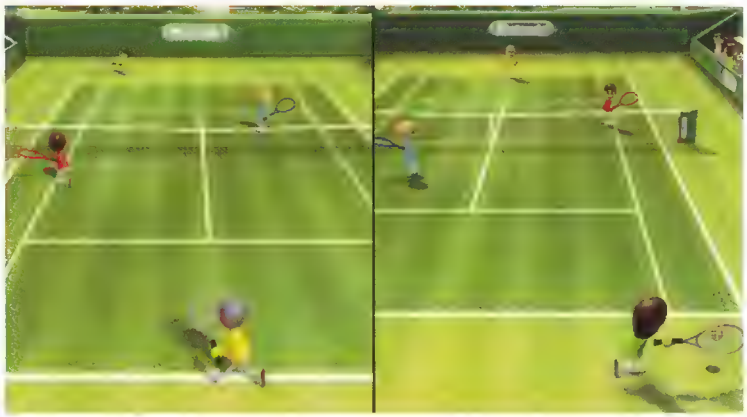
score 7.0

	Wii
	Nintendo
	Nintendo
	NA
	November
	E



As much as people love Wii Sports--myself included--it bears mention that the games themselves are for the most part ultra-pedestrian. Once the newness wears off, which admittedly takes a while, you begin to realize how overly simplistic the venues really are, and if you're like me, begin to pine for a sequel that allows more freedom of movement and technique... Take the boxing for instance, segueing from, say, tennis (the most popular venue), newbies' weaknesses are exposed, sans the reflexes to bob, weave and block, let alone sneak in a flurry. If only the tennis game had a similar mode where the nunchuk could be attached for perpendicular movement and more shot technique once the basics are mastered. Elsewhere the baseball really isn't, and the bowling is about as fun as watching it on TV, leaving golf and boxing as the best games on the disc. The weebles wear on me too. Not that they're weebles; that they're primitive weebles. Still, as a pack-in, it's hard to take pot-shots at a game that so perfectly acclimates users to the new control. **DH**

"...perfectly acclimates users to the new control."



Excite Truck

Really exciting trucks

score 7.5

	Wii
	Monster Games
	Nintendo
	NA
	November
	E

The most underrated of all the launch titles, Excite Truck takes some getting used to (all of the tilt style racers do) but once you're in the zone, this is an adrenaline-charged racer with a lot to offer. When was the last time you played a racing game with morphing terrain and quarter-mile-high air set to cheesy hair metal? Not to mention a boost that lets you mow down trees and the ability to launch your opponents into the air while you zip by. Reminiscent of the best arcade games of old, Excite Truck is one of those games where the more acclimated you become the more you can do—a lot like a great fighting game. What begins as an exercise to merely finish soon becomes an exercise in course mastery as you work your way through each cup, unlocking vehicles and perfecting a laundry list of techniques. ET is also one of only a few launch titles that really show off the Wii's formidable CPU. **DH**

"The most underrated of all the launch titles..."

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami	Available	December
Developer	Konami	Online Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Castlevania
Portrait of Ruin

Another great Vania adventure

words **Brady Fiechter**

Twenty years and still going mighty strong. Twenty years and still pretty much the way it was the first time you laid the smack down on flying medusa heads and shambling mummies. In the excellent Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin, many classic enemies return—give a warm welcome to the disgusting boss of dead bodies wrapped around a laser-shooting eyeball core from Symphony of the Night—along with a handful of inspired new creatures and pretty much every other Castlevania trademark.

One of the biggest attempts at change includes the presence of two characters working in tandem. Jonathan Morris cracks a whip and swings blunt objects with the same aplomb as every vampire-slayer before him; Charlotte Orlean, a witch with a touch of sweetness, casts nasty spells and wields some high-coverage blades. They can be switched back forth on the fly, or played together while the computer controls one or the other for as long as the magic meter is kept juiced. It's fun to use their more powerful group attacks to wipe out the enemy line more forcefully, launch off each other's heads for a boosted double-jump, or maybe use group strength to push a heavy object. But outside the camaraderie and visual appeal of a helper ally, there's not that much help involved along the lines of big gameplay enhancements.

I'd almost rather fly solo in some areas, but that's as much nostalgia as objective criticism. It's the anime style of the game, too, that will serve as a nice change to some, an unfortunate dilution to the classically Gothic Castlevania spirit to others. I started to warm up to the brighter tones as the game went forth, and in the end, kind of appreciated the change. You can't fault the grand style the artists have painted into the lovely 2D aesthetic. And high praise also to Micheru Yamane's infectious, perfectly fitting soundtrack.

Not much has really changed in the end, but searching for countless objects through the labyrinthine castles halls, leveling up your character and enjoying the mood of exploration still carries a wonderful appeal. **play**

Portrait of Ruin — score 8.5

"...searching for countless objects through the labyrinthine castles halls, leveling up your character and enjoying the mood of exploration still carries a wonderful appeal."

Gorgeous 2D art continues the rich tradition.

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami	Available	Now
Developer	Kojima Productions	Online/Multi	1-6; Ad hoc and infrastructure	ESRB Rating	T

Metal Gear Solid
Portable Ops

words **Greg Orlando**

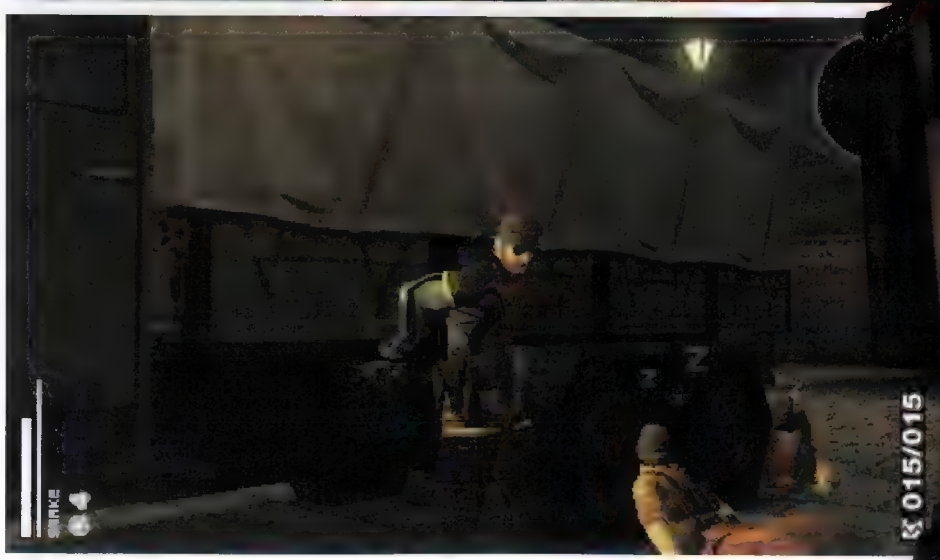
You're not the boss of me!

"This ain't some card game," the promotional literature for Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops reads. Call it a new deal or a fresh hand; Konami has shrunk its venerable warhorse for the PSP, and the results are surprisingly fine.

Ops takes place in 1970, six years after the events of Metal Gear Solid 3. Ops firmly roots itself in the mythos, and characters such as Para-Medic, Roy Campbell, Ocelot all make appearances.

Familiar gameplay mechanics have Naked Snake and his various allies slithering along corridors and grabbing unwary guards to interrogate or use as human shields.

Konami's made a deft translation here, taking a console game and compacting it for the handheld PSP in fine fashion. The game loses a bit in terms of color, shading, and camera efficiency, but the overall package runs smoothly save



for the inevitable visual hiccups when Ops isn't sure whether the first- or third-person view is appropriate for the protagonist as he navigates in and around narrow corridors.

In an interesting move, Ops chooses to draw attention away from its protagonist by allowing him to build an army. Enemies can be converted to allies; Snake need only knock a foe insensate and then drag the body back to a truck for interrogation/conversion. Four-man squads can be built in this way, and converted allies' skills come in many different flavors so as to add an interesting bit of depth to the proceedings. Each is ranked in terms of his skills with weaponry, and possesses an inclination, say, toward weapon development, medicine, spying, running, grenade tossing, and the like.

Players control only one squad member at a time, but can swap between members at will. In addition, support squads provide pre-mission intelligence, improved healing for party members, and allow for the creation of new items. A neat collectible element allows players to trade soldiers back and forth, and Konami has promised to establish WiFi hotspots where special characters can be enlisted to join the fight. All told, Snake can form a 100-man army for use in the game's single- and multiplayer affairs.

"Konami's made a deft translation here, taking a console game and compacting it for the handheld PSP in fine fashion."

The great drawback, of course, is that playing anonymous soldier #534, regardless of his specialties, isn't half as interesting as playing as Snake. It's a neat idea, to be sure, to have Snake aligned with enemies-turned-allies, but it's not exactly consistent with the character. Snake has always operated by himself, and Ops' hero of the day formula is ultimately unsatisfying despite being the solo play's great draw.

Multiplayer options let players risk their hard-won squads in real combat competitions where the winner gains access to all defeated foes. All's fair in love and war, and Ops is smart enough, thankfully, to make at least some of its battles count. **play**

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

score 8.0

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SNK	Available	December 2006
Developer	SNK	Online/Multi	1-2 players	ESRB Rating	T

Metal Slug Anthology

So when DO we get to ride giant metal slugs anyhow?

words Eric L. Patterson

While somewhere out there, a core group of hardcore Contra fans will call for my head the moment I utter these words, no series has come to represent and define the side scrolling action shooter genre like Metal Slug. The secret to its success was that SNK crafted a game, and later a series, that combines pulse-pounding action with some of the most detailed and personality-filled graphics and characters 2D gaming has ever seen.

Unfortunately, for Metal Slug fans, owning every chapter of this epic shooter saga has been quite a chore. The first non-NeoGeo release was back in the days of the Saturn, and since then, the various games of the series have been scattered here and there over as many iterations of gaming hardware. Well, want no more; to commemorate the ten year anniversary of Metal Slug, SNK has bestowed upon us Metal Slug Anthology, a collection jam-packed with seven different doses of run and gun goodness. Yes, that means that even Metal Slug 6–you know, the chapter you probably haven't even played yet–is along for the ride.

If you like blowing things to kingdom come, then this is your ticket to paradise. Pick your favorite character from a colorful squad of pixelled peacekeepers, including the duo you've been dying to see show up in this series: Ralf and Clark from Ikari Warriors fame, who come along for the fun in Metal Slug 6. Each game finds new and even more creative means of tossing an endless stream of enemy cannon fodder your way, as you use enough heavy weaponry, rack up enough of a body count, and make enough things go boom in an explosion of fire and debris to make any Hollywood summer blockbuster green with envy. All of that classic Metal Slug action has been compacted down into one UMD disc, and little has been compromised in the process. Control is spot on thanks to the PSP's analog stick, and as for the trademark visuals, SNK decided the best solution for fitting Metal Slug onto the PSP's letterbox screen was to leave the choice of how to do so up to the player. Three options are present, allowing you to select between displaying the games at their original resolution, proportionally expanding the games until they fit the screen vertically, or stretching the games to fill the screen completely.

Sadly, even all of the guns and ammo of the Metal Slug crew can't keep the threat of load times completely at bay. While annoying, except for a few odd instances during Metal Slug 6, most in-game loading that shows up happens between stages of a mission, which doesn't negatively affect the actual gameplay. For good or for bad, it is the small price we must pay for getting what is otherwise such a great collection of games in convenient travel size.

Metal Slug Anthology

score 8.5

\+ Uhm... it's every major Metal Slug game, in portable form

\- Load times, Metal Slug 6 suffers from minor graphical issues

"If you like blowing things to kingdom come, then this is your ticket to paradise."

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System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Mastiff	Available	February 27, 2007
Developer	Nihon Falcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Gurumin
A Monstrous Adventure

words **Heather Campbell**

Man, does the PSP need to start strutting its stuff. Every time I look at the little system that should-have, I get frustrated. I mean, if you had told me that I'd be holding a miniature Playstation in my hands, but I would have to suffer through endless ports as opposed to original titles, I would have been miserable at the system's launch. I probably wouldn't have picked one up. Here I am, playing Loco Roco, Lumines, and … and that's about it.

So I don't know for certain if Gurumin is sweet, or if I'm so desperate for quality PSP titles that I'm looking beyond the flaws of the few decent games released on the system. I had a fine amount of fun playing it, even if the game is just another port. To be fair, it's a translation of a Windows title in Japan, so it almost qualifies as an original release here in the states.

Yeah, I had a good time with Gurumin … when I wasn't waiting for the game to go. The loading time on the alpha I was given was atrocious. Every 30 seconds, the game loads for 10 seconds. There is loading lag on the defeat of enemies, loading delay on every bit of dialogue, and of course, loading times between rooms. I pray that this is just a defect of the preview release, and not a feature of the game proper.

The game works on charm, and there's a lot of it on display here. Featuring a large, quirky cast (think monsters obsessed with dancing, and old men who hit on twelve-year-old girls), what the game lacks in finesse, it makes up for with character. The environments may not be gigantic, but they're colorful and well-designed. And for some reason, the jumping is endlessly fun. Bouncing around dungeons like Link on uppers, Gurumin is a girlish Legend of Zelda. Switches, break-away walls, falling through floors; the game is traditional, but still quite pleasant. Especially for the PSP.

As you can see, she's very excited.

"The game works on charm, and there's a lot of it on display here."

The story centers on young Parin, a girl who is sent off to live with her grandfather in a town with no children. Soon, she encounters a ghost-kid, and is invited into a realm of monsters. When one of the monsters is kidnapped by a Phantom, Parin agrees to go rescue the friend from the fiend, and takes a huge drill to dish out her smug, pastel violence.

Like I said, the game isn't unfamiliar ground. But the polish and charisma of the title gives it an edge over other action-RPGs on the PSP. If only you could spend more time playing and less time waiting around!

Interview

play: What sets Gurumin apart from other games you've worked on?

Chris: The style of this game is really catchy. It's one of the [illegible] but it's one of the more family-friendly games I've worked on.

Amber: [laughs]

Chris: I've done a lot of war games. It's very refreshing to do something that's fun.

Amber: What's different for me on this game is that there isn't your average cutesy love plot. There's adventure and bring-a-friend. Chris wanted me to portray an older, deeper vocal range for Parin, to give her strength.

Do you encourage improvisation when working on a game like Gurumin?

Chris: We were tied to the Japanese timing on the lines, and the English and Japanese languages don't always work out, syllable-wise. We had to get creative on the one, to make [illegible] fit.

Amber: I can't remember any specific problems we had, but a lot of the Japanese names I had to do over and over again.

Chris: "Da-RUU-ma."

Amber: Nailed it.

Chris: One of the big challenges for Amber was that Parin puts on different costumes. And any time Parin put on one of those costumes, Amber had Parin act like that character. So if Parin was wearing a monkey costume, Amber had to sound like a monkey! And she had over 600 lines in Gurumin.

That's a lot of monkeys. Now, besides Gurumin, do you have any other projects that stand out in your minds as a favorite?

Amber: Umm. Should it be a Mastiff game? I'm only done one! Another game I worked on with Chris was Dominia 2. I played a little fairy and she was so cute!

Chris: "Chi-MUU-sea." Yeah, she was adorable. For me, there's a series that I've been working on a long time who that's the Metal Gear series.

You're directing the PS2 game, correct?

Chris: Yeah, that's Metal Gear 3. I am. We'll be starting that … in a while.

Izuna

Legend of the Unemployed Ninja

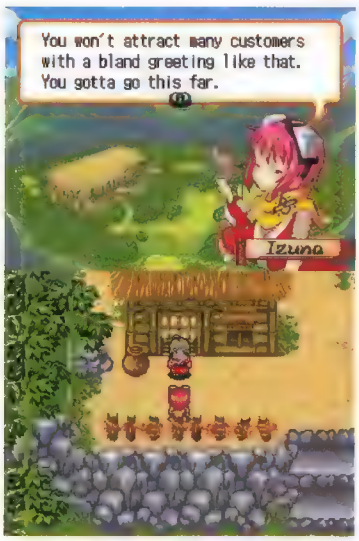
System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Atlus	Available	Q1 2007
Developer	Ninja Studio	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Will assassinate for food

words Eric L. Patterson

Pink-haired anime cutie Izuna has a problem: she's a ninja, but the ninja profession hasn't been doing so good lately. While checking out a remote village her and her crew have travelled to in hopes of starting a new life for themselves, she comes across a beautiful shimmering jewel. Thinking maybe her luck has changed, Izuna swipes it, but in doing so brings down the wrath of the Gods of the village.

There's only one way to break the curse and return her friends to normal: brave the various dungeons that surround the village, find the God residing at the bottom of each, and convince them to release their portion of the curse. Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja is a classic action RPG dungeon crawler, taking a healthy dose of inspiration from the game that would become the most influential title in the genre, 1980's indie PC cult classic Rogue. Like Rogue, every floor of the game's eight dungeons are randomly generated every time you visit them: rooms, monsters, item placement, nothing is ever the same twice. As well, just as in Rogue, dungeons are a one-way street, so that after you enter one, the only way to get back out is to continue to progress down level by level until you reach the bottom, or find and use a specific item that allows you to warp back out to the village.



In order to survive the perils of these dungeons, you'll need to equip Izuna with weapons, armor, and support items, which range from consumables like healing orbs and status-changing pills, to talismans, which can be bound to weapons and armor to boost their stats and abilities. It is here that the separation between those who will enjoy this game and those who will absolutely hate it begins, all thanks to what happens when you die. Upon death, everything you were carrying with you is lost, unless special precautions were taken beforehand. This means that, one bad turn of luck when dealing with a particular dungeon's creatures, and everything you've worked so hard to collect could all be gone in the blink of an eye.

If that sounds like the kind of frustration that could end in your DS being tossed against a wall, well, it is. Izuna, like all Rogue style dungeon crawlers, takes patience, dedication, and the type of gamer who is a glutton for punishment. If that sounds like your idea of fun, then Izuna isn't such a bad mistress... and hey, at least she gives you a cute smile as she's smacking you around.

"Pink-haired anime cutie Izuna has a problem: she's a ninja, but the ninja profession hasn't been doing so good lately."

Izuna

score 6.5

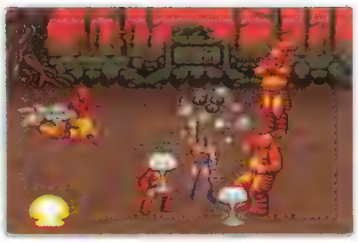
\+ Great oldschool gaming level of challenge, mixed with fun character designs and humor

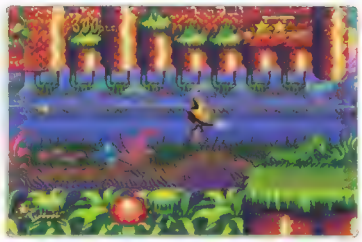
\- Background graphics are terribly bland, gameplay a bit shallow compared to other Rogue clones

Sega Genesis Collection

score 8.5

System	PSP (also PS2)	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Backbone Entertainment	**Available**	Now
Publisher	Sega	**ESRB Rating**	E

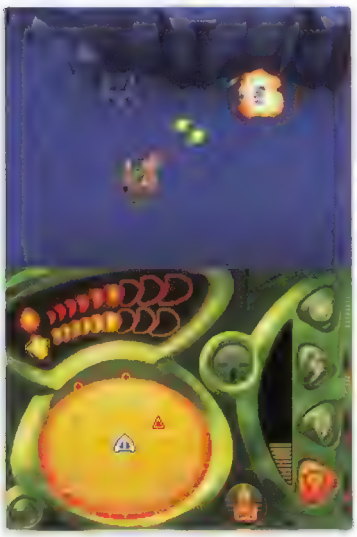




The PSP has become the platform of choice for classic game compilations, and Sega is finally stepping up to the plate with its impressive library of 16-bit classics. Compared to recent releases from Capcom and EA, the Sega Genesis Collection feels unusually generous; while there are a few strange omissions, there's no sign that Sega is holding back content to justify a second volume.

The 28 games on the UMD include most of the Genesis entries in the Ecco, Golden Axe, Phantasy Star, Shinobi, Sonic and Vectorman series, as well as a dozen titles that failed to establish popular franchises. Several of the games are marred by a bug that darkens the background when scrolling in parallax-heavy areas, but otherwise the emulation seems flawless.

Some of these games haven't exactly aged well (Oh, Sword of Vermillion—could I really have loved you once?) but games like Shinobi III, Ristar, and Sonic II are true classics that are still worth playing today. Heck, the collection is worth buying for Phantasy Star II and IV alone—they may feel a little rusty, but they're probably the best RPGs you can get on the PSP. The absence of the Streets of Rage games is disappointing (sacrificed for a Teen rating?) but there's more than enough here to make this the compilation of choice for when you're stranded on a desert island with nothing but a PSP and a crate full of batteries. **Casey Loe**



Chicken Little: Ace in Action

score 7.5

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	DC Studios	**Available**	Now
Publisher	Buena Vista Games	**ESRB Rating**	E

I know what you're thinking: It's a Chicken Little game; how good can it be? Well you might be surprised. For one thing Chicken Little himself is nowhere in sight, making way for his eminently cooler friends; a 'roided-out humanoid chicken soldier named Ace; Abby, a hot babe chicken spaceship pilot, and Runt, a fat pig with Yosemite Sam legs that pilots a tank. Together they make up a tri-mode shooter divided between ¾-view foot, spaceship, and tank assaults, each with their own specific special maneuvers. Adorned with vivid 3D stages—DC have the DS polygon machine firing on all cylinders—what elevates Ace in Action above the norm is the firing directionals via the button cluster, console derivative moves such as Runt's Panzer Dragoon-like multiple-enemy-lock-on and ramming ability, big bad bosses, and a cheeky peck of quirky characters like R&D specialist Kung Pow Cow and President Turkey Lurkey. The game also poses quite the challenge with patterns and enemy types galore and the sub-screen makes for a nice intel screen/weapons selector. It may be chock full of farm animals in space but Ace in Action deserves a spot alongside the DS's top shooters. **Dave Halverson**

Sell by date: infinity

Beggar Prince *(Xin Qigai Xin)*

System(s)	Genesis/MegaDrive	Publisher/Localizer	Super Fighter Team
Developer	C&E	Available	1996/2006

Heather Campbell

Reviewing Beggar Prince is a bit like time traveling. See, as a young girl growing up with her shelf of game systems, I poured over Gamefan, Next Generation and other magazines for the latest information about upcoming releases for my Master System, SNES, Genesis, GameGear, etc. Peering into tiny, glossy screen-shots, and chewing on reviews, I carefully selected my next title to beg my parents about.

This was before the internet, before demos; my only rudder in the sea of new releases was the trustworthy games journalists on the other side of the page. If they said, "Final Fantasy III is a quintessential gaming experience," I sat up at attention. When Gamefan wrote about Sonic the Hedgehog, I nodded as if part of a conversation. It was game reviews that filled the void between cartridges, and the game reviews I grew up with were on 8 and 16 bits titles.

Now, never did I imagine writing game reviews for a living; I think when I got my SegaCD, I was set on becoming an archeologist-astronaut someday. But here I am, humbly typing away my thoughts on the latest releases, hoping to nudge a consumer closer to that copy of God Hand, away from whatever shiny racing game came out this week. I'm proud of what I do, but there's an air of melancholy at my keyboard. No matter how many games I'm going to cover, I'll never get to give my opinion on the newest SNES or Genny game. The consoles still sit in my living room on display shelves carefully dusted every few weeks, but the slots remain empty.

" I step into my time machine, and get to review a new Genesis game almost a decade after the system went silent."

At least, they were until Super Fighter Team decided to release a new Genesis game this year. After eight years of famine, there is indeed a brand new game to feed your aging Sega system, and it's an RPG by the name of Beggar Prince. I step into my time machine, and get to review a new Genesis game almost a decade after the system went silent.

What bitter-sweetness it is then, that my first Genesis review has to be for a game so mild and mediocre. I salute and applaud the work that Super Fighter Team has done with this game -- imagine sitting in your room in 1996 and playing a game that was fan-released -- but the game is simply outmoded and nothing more. Localized from the Chinese original, Beggar Prince is an RPG completely confined to the merits and drawbacks of mid-90's role-playing design. Nothing transcends, and little is unique beyond the game's actual, tangible release novelty.

Beggar Prince is based on The Prince and the Pauper, with some eastern RPG flavor. You begin the game as the bratty, spoiled prince who switches places with a street urchin. Instead of learning how common people live, the prince must soon save the kingdom from an Evil Cat Minister, by mastering magic, weaponry, and defense. Uncommon in the RPG world, our hero is alone on his adventure; though plenty of NPCs are scattered throughout the world, none of them takes up the sword beside you. For almost forty hours, you wander the countryside by yourself. This is a very lonely quest, and the solitude of your journey is made more difficult by the annoying monster encounter rates, straightforward story, and constantly looping music cues. Throw in repetitive battles with no unfamiliar features, and you've got a game that might have been playable in '96, but is simply tired now.

Limited to only 600 copies, Beggar Prince is not something you're going to find on the shelves at Wal-Mart. Once the initial printing sold out, Super Fighter Team announced a second run of the game that can be pre-ordered now. But like a precious antique, the game is only eligible because of its collectiblity; the story and gameplay don't exceed the uniqueness of the game's contemporary circulation.

Somewhere in the past/present, a little girl reads this review and shrugs, turning to the next page. I only wish I could present her with something more extraordinary to pester her parents over. I guess she'll just have to wait for Super Fighter Team's next release. **play**

Beggar Prince (Xin Qigai Xin)

1996 score 8.0

2006 score 5.0

\+ Ohmi, god, it's a Genesis game! In 2007!

\- Ugh. That's some ugly, ugly Lovart

Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama

New Hardware Launch Special

PlayStation 3 Japan Launch Report

words Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

The dust has settled. It's over. The 100,000 PlayStation 3s available at launch in Japan are snapped up and gone. Play Magazine managed to get one, but only barely. We thought showing up sixteen hours early at the ginormous Akihabara branch of Yodobashi Camera -- the largest consumer electronics store in the world -- would provide plenty of leeway. Imagine our dismay when we were handed a ticket identifying us as #1156 in line...ah, but we get ahead of ourselves.

In Akihabara

The queue at about 8PM the day before launch.

First, there was the riot. Play was originally no more than 100 spaces behind in the line, paying no attention to police barking false claims that "construction" was about to begin, and everyone should please skedaddle. The throng rapidly became unruly, and around 10:30PM all hell suddenly broke loose. It was a stampede, hundreds of people rushing for the entrance to Yodobashi, likely the result of a simple misunderstanding. The push of the crowd was unreal. Rows of bicycles, scooters and motorcycles could be seen culminating, collapsing domino-style through peripheral vision. Backpacks and jackets were being trampled underfoot. Harried hollers of "we're not selling any PlayStation 3s today!" could be heard, as the hive-mind of the PS3-hungry horde hurtled hence towards their wholly unknown goal. Play made it as far as the escalators before being escorted out by the fuzz.

What followed were several hours of fear and doubt, as the masses slowly reorganized themselves into several impromptu queues. Play picked the most likely-looking spot and simply stuck it out, as the police attempted to maintain order. At around midnight, the line started to move. With no end-point in sight, we could only pray we were near the front, as

Gamers and resellers alike hunker down for a long night beneath Yodobashi.

Ambulances and the fire brigade were quickly on the scene.

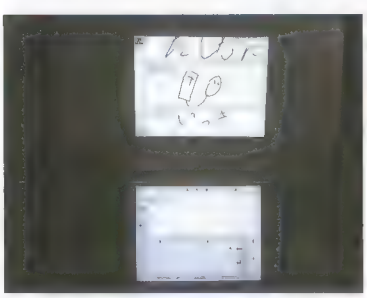
stressed-out Yodobashi employees ushered us into their underground parking lot.

At this point, the mood quickly devolved into despair. A look in any direction around the aircraft hangar-sized parking lot revealed hundreds of people, and we were on level *B4*. Did that mean there were three more floors of people above us? Or did it just mean someone was a big Brent Spiner fan?

Eventually, we were handed a ticket. A "Line-Breaking Prevention Ticket", as the helpful legend exclaimed. The number was #1156.

Despair quickly turned to outright desperation. Dissatisfied noises in a cornucopia of languages -- Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Arabic, English -- could be heard. Rumors were flying left and right that Yodobashi was only getting 100 PlayStation 3s...what did being #1156 in line mean? Was even a 20GB PS3 going to be attainable?

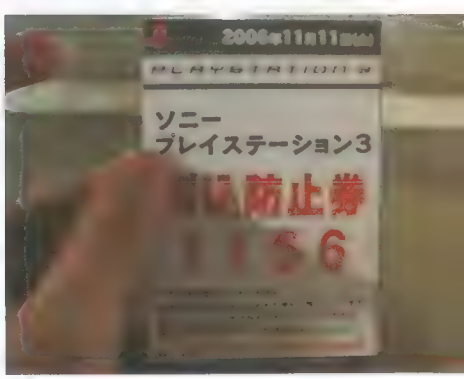
We would not know the answer until 7AM. As the Prevention Tickets were exchanged for slips of paper guaranteeing *actual*



Play whiles away the hours with Pictochat. Enjoy one artist's rendition of the system he expects to whip the PS3.

PS3s that day -- 60GB, no less! -- there was suddenly jubilation. The Japanese were more subdued in their knowledge that yes, Yodobashi assured them a PlayStation 3 that day. But the majority of those in line -- foreign "tenbuyers" (a portmanteau of the Japanese for "reseller" and the English "buy") -- made their appreciation more apparent, with flurries of raucous cell phone calls and the passing around of cigarettes in the strictly non-smoking underground facility. Now, it was only a matter of waiting.

When the time finally came, and our group of 20 out of a roughly-estimated 2,000 was ushered to the sixth floor, the moment itself



This is what an official Line-Breaking Prevention Ticket looks like.

A malaise settles over the crowd in the early morning hours of November 11.

The holy grail.

Cadres of foreign tenbuyers prepares their haul for collection on the streets of Akihabara.

passed quickly. I'll take a 60GB, an HDMI cable, Ridge Racer 7, Gundam, Genji and Resistance. In-and-out, lickety-split. It was only on the train ride home that it hit us -- one of the first 100,000 PlayStation 3s unleashed upon the world was ours. How sad that the majority of systems didn't find themselves in the hands of hungry gamers, but rather, the multitude of tenbuyers. Reportedly the first PlayStation 3 sold in Japan -- handed out by Ken Kutaragi himself -- was to a Chinese man, who didn't even buy a single game. Coincidence? Probably not.

While Nick was fiddling with Pictochat in a concrete bunker beneath Akihabara, Dai was at Yodobashi Camera in Shinjuku, traditionally *the* spot for lines in all of Japan. It was here in 2000, for instance, that more than 10,000 people lined up for the PlayStation 2. The turnout on November 11th was about a tenth what it was six years ago, with foreign and homeless

The line snaked around several blocks.

In Shinjuku

The very first PlayStation 3 owner in Shinjuku.

resellers making up a large percentage. Compared to the mad stampede in Akihabara, the situation in Shinjuku was more subdued, with people waiting patiently in line for the most part, though it was amusing to see the massive foreign tenbuyer contingent clearly not understanding requests from the police such as, "Step backwards, please."

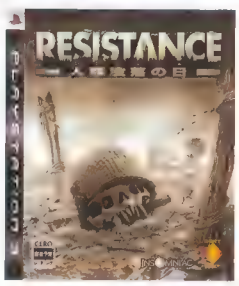
Various media snap away at the first shipment of PS3 consoles arriving at Yodobashi.

Sold Out!

PS2 VS. PS3 Japan Launch By The Numbers

	PlayStation 2	PlayStation 3
Price	¥39,800 ($345)	¥49,800 ($431 -- 20GB model)
Release date	03/04/00	11/11/06
Number of launch titles	7	5
Units sold first weekend	Approx. 900,000	Approx. 88,000
Number of people in line at Shinjuku Yodobashi Camera	10000	1000
Number of Ridge Racers available at launch	1	1
Number of attempted Akihabara suicides blamed on failure to get system on launch day	1	0

The Launch Games



Resistance: Fall of Man -- Insomniac/ Sony -- ¥5800 ($50)

Ridge Racer 7 -- Bandai-Namco -- ¥7140 ($62)

Genji: Kamui Souran -- Game Republic/ Sony -- ¥5800 ($50)

Gundam: Target In Sight -- Bandai-Namco -- ¥7140 ($62)

Sega Golf Club: Three Miyazato Siblings Built-In -- Sega -- ¥7140 ($62)

Last second Wii launch report

Wii Japan Launch Last-Second Report

words **Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama**

The major retailers learned their lesson after the semi-disastrous PS3 launch, with a huge percentage of the crowd -- foreign resellers -- not understanding simple Japanese instructions. As a result, most venues passed out tickets guaranteeing a system to those lined up the previous night, causing a hefty decrease in the impressive, kilometer-long lines. Further, many shops had offered Wii preorders months before, thanks to launch-day shipments that were in (comparatively) abundant supply. Nonetheless, the Wii launch was just as exciting -- if not as dramatic -- as the PlayStation 3's. We're literally writing this hours before the issue goes to press, so further impressions, including those on the several Japan-only Wii launch titles, will have to wait.

A Wii preorder line two weeks before the system went on sale.

The small line that formed in front of Gamers, one of the few stores in Akihabara not to take preorders.

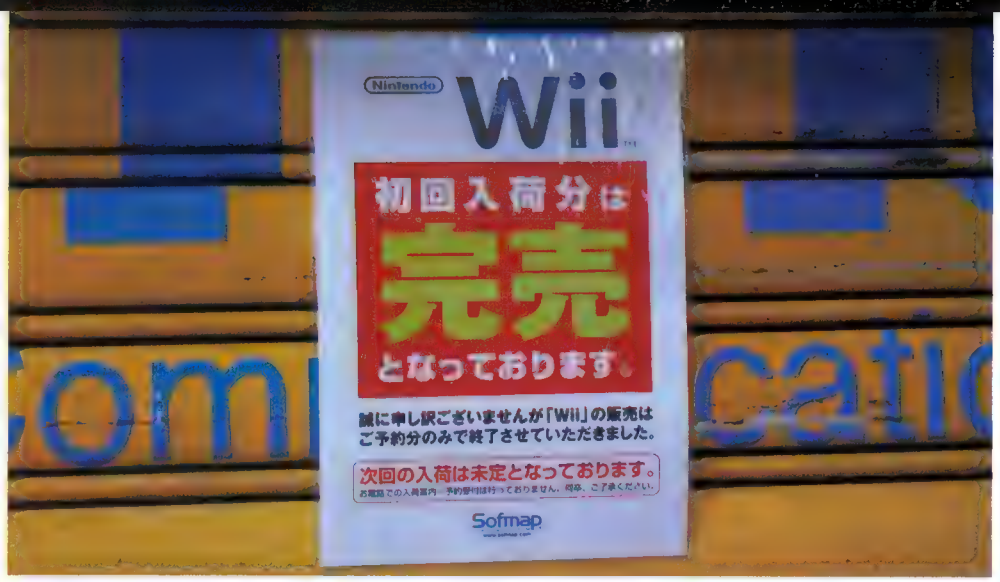
"The Wii finally arrives! WHEE!!" screams the banner at Asobit City on Akihabara's main drag.

Yodobashi Camera's special Wii-only cashiers. Helpful legends are provided in Chinese and Korean for tenbuyers.

GameCube VS. Wii Japan Launch By The Numbers

	GameCube	Wii
Price	¥25,000 ($216)	¥25,000 ($216)
Release date	09/14/01	12/02/06
Number of launch titles	3	16
Units sold first weekend	Approx. 500,000	Approx. 400,000
Number of people in line at Shinjuku Yodobashi Camera	300	1000
Number of Mario games available at launch	0	0

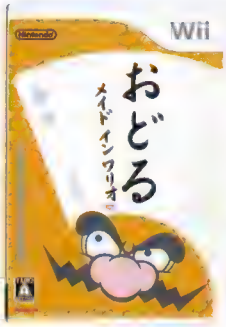
An extremely hardcore gentleman celebrated the Wii launch by dressing up as wrestler Stan Hansen and wielding a pair of nunchaku. And why not?



The line snaked around several blocks.

Wii Launch Games

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess -- ¥6800 ($59)



Odoru Made In Wario -- Nintendo -- ¥5800 ($50)

Wii Sports -- Nintendo -- ¥4800 ($42)

My First Wii (with one Wii Remote) -- Nintendo -- ¥4800 ($42)

Super Surgery Caduceus Z: The Two Super Surgeries -- Atlus -- ¥6090 ($53)

SD Gundam: Scad Hammers -- Bandai-Namco -- ¥6090 ($53)

Elebits -- Konami -- ¥5800 ($50)

Swing Golf Pangya -- Tecmo -- ¥6090 ($53)

Wing Island -- Hudson -- ¥6090 ($53)

Temple Street Fair Master -- Bandai-Namco -- ¥6090 ($53)

Necro-Nesia -- Spike -- ¥7140 ($62)

Red Steel -- UbiSoft -- ¥6800 ($59)

Crayon Shin-Chan: Most Powerful Family Kasukabe King Wii Banpresto -- ¥6090 ($53)

Tamagotchi's Flashy Flashy President! Bandai-Namco -- ¥6090 ($53)

Super Monkey Ball: Uki-Uki Party Big Gathering -- Sega -- ¥6090 ($53)

Kororinpa -- Hudson -- ¥5040 ($44)

The man who brought you games...

Brady Fiechter

Nolan Bushnell

play: When I first attempted to contact you for an interview, you were locked away at Burning Man. What led you on that journey?
Nolan Bushnell: I believe you need to do things to maintain that creative edge. You need to put yourself in different situations. And it's also important to be part of arts communities. I think there is a lot of brilliant stuff coming along. It's a really synergistic, collaborative environment out there.

So you enjoyed the experience?
I loved it. Absolutely loved it. It's a little raw [laughs]. Next time I'm going to focus a little more on creature comforts. But I'm definitely going again, and I've got a couple of projects figure out.

Your mind is constantly going.
Constantly going.
Alyssa Bushnell [daughter, uWink PR]: What keeps Nolan so young is his curiosity. That really defines him. A lot of us, when we get older, we do things that are comfortable for us. We lose that edge. Nolan, he's in his 60s and he's more curious than [most children].

As gamers, there's definitely a spirit of a child living in us.
Right. A child's mind, be an elegant beginning, learner.

As the father of video games, are you a proud father?
Yes I am. You know, I think I've got a few juvenile delinquents. I personally don't like Grand Theft Auto, I wouldn't want my kids playing it. Things like that. At the same time, I am very proud of my contribution. I actually think Wayne Wiitanen and Steve Russell were the actual fathers, but I commercialized games.

"I wish I hadn't sold Atari as soon as I did. I was young and tired and got offered more money than I ever thought I was going to make."

What regrets might you have looking back?
I wish I hadn't sold Atari as soon as I did. I was young and tired and got offered more money than I ever thought I was going to make. I think there were a lot of things that subsequently happened to Atari that wouldn't have happened under my leadership.

The experience itself must have been amazing.
Absolutely. We had such a powerful technical team at Atari.

Tell me a story you've never really mentioned before while working with Atari.
Wow. I've told a lot of them. Let's see… A lot of people don't realize we had a gameplay over the telephone line project in the early 70s, called Atari Tel. We actually had working in the lab, a 2,200 baud modem in a 300 baud world. We patented it. That was a project that got canceled under Warner. Had somebody pursued it, we may have been able to present that equivalent of the internet to the world in the early 80s.

You're big on social interaction. How do you see the internet?
I think that the interaction, you can be home alone, you can be home alone on the internet with other people, and you can be in a public space with people. I believe that people are naturally seeking social interaction and that in some ways, we see uWink being an end point in a person's digital life. Suppose you go into myspace, and you find that four of your friends happen to be at uWink. You think, "hmm, maybe I should get my but down there." Maybe you're in Flickr, and you're browsing around, and you see these tables of people having a great time at uWink. Or you're at uWink playing games with people, and somebody comes by to take your picture, you show up on Flickr, or you email it to your friends. We intend on using all the tools of the internet to enhance the experience here and in the home.

Fast forward 10 years. Where will games be?
Well, the interesting thing about photo realism is that it separates the barriers on the platforms. It's pretty weak marketing content to say my photo realism is better than your photo realism. I think the network will be remarkably more powerful than it is now. I think that you will have a whole genre of games that are social, like we have, that are played in the living room. Kind of the video metaphorical equivalent to the board game. The family sits down and all plays together, but it's not Halo. Remember, most console games are basically connected to the living room television and the network. I think there will be a morphing into a new gaming platform that becomes very important for multiple players in the same room. That's the genesis to what we're doing [here at uWink.]

Is there something missing in our departure from simplicity?
Oh yes, absolutely. Again, that's what we're trying to do here, we're going for simplicity. We're not going after the World of Warcraft gamers. We're going after the market that wouldn't necessarily be identified [as the hardcore]. When Pong started, Pac-Man, Centipede, all those, 50 percent of the population played games. Now it's 15, 20 percent. We believe we can take it back up into the 60 and 70 percent range, by giving games the fun they used to have. They were fun in the 70s, they got complex in the 80s, that lost the casual gameplay. And they got violent. The Mortal Kombats came out, lost the female audience.

Nintendo seems to be echoing your sentiments.
I think their strategy is a good one.

So you really think the move to complexity is what dropped such a large number from the gaming audience?
Absolutely. The combination of complexity and violence.
Alyssa: I was probably Pong's first beta tester. I've been a gamer before most people.
Nolan: In fact, you saw it when it was a little rocket ship on the screen.
Alyssa: But I played Pong, I played all of those games, and when they got to this certain level of complexity, I just stopped. And then I picked them back again when I started to get into Tetris, and then I stopped. When Nolan designed some of these newer games, I became really addicted again. But yeah, and you know, I'm a woman, there's eight of us kids, and the girls in our family, we all play the same games. And the guys play everything, Complex games just don't appeal to us. I grew up playing Pong, experiencing games from the beginning.

Before even Pong, there was Computer Space.

With the first restaurant recently opened in Woodland Hills, CA, plans are to quickly go national.

I do love games today, but I also really miss simplicity. It's not just nostalgia.
We gave terminals to our board of directors. It was interesting to hear what happened. They put them in their recreational rooms, in their bars and whatnot. And in all cases, their wives became addicted to certain games. It was fun, because they joked that their wives came to bed at 3 am because of our damned games.

Nice role reversal. But you know, it is interesting to watch. I see my girlfriend watching me play, she's fascinated, but she just doesn't feel comfortable with the controller or trying to come to grips with what to do.
If you look at today's controllers, like the Xbox controller. There's a lot of buttons on that puppy. Trigger points and various things.
Alyssa: I look at that controller, there's no way in hell I'm gonna get it.

And you think the violence turns off a lot of people?
I know it does. Absolutely.

Then why is most every game violent?
Guys like it. And there's an advantage in that shooters have very, very good gameplay. The shoot or be shot, I've got to expose myself a bit to get off a shot. It's a very good risk-reward metric. I'm not speaking toward the morality, but in terms of game structure, the one-on-one shooter has powerful game structure. And in a game, balancing risk and reward is the hardest thing to do.

Around the days you were designing Pong, what was going through your mind as a new creator of games?
Well, the very first game, I was trying to emulate Space Wars cheaply. So I was thinking as much about cost reduction and can I get this to work using the process that I've figured out. I built a few building blocks that looked like it would cut major pieces of cost out of making a game. Most computers at that point in time ran at 500 kilohertz. In order to do video, you need a minimum of 3 megahertz clock cycles. I was doing some pretty trick technology. I'm pretty proud of it.

Was it an emotional thing when you finally saw Pong up and running?
Very much. You know, the biggest epiphany… Now remember, Pong was the second game. Computer Space was the first. And remember the first time the rocket ship displayed on screen, it was a eureka moment. "Wow!!" I had been working on it for three months before that situation.

So what game out there now is grabbing your interest.
Well, I've been so busy, it's hard to find time for too much, but the one game I'm playing on airplanes is the old DS game Advance Wars. I love that game. I honestly play a lot of our games here at uWink too.

You've dabbled in things like robotics. What about electronics fascinates you?
I think the question is more, what about science fiction fascinates me? I basically want to make the future happen faster. I can't imagine the future being without touch-screen ordering. I can't imagine a future without robots. I can't imagine a future without video games. If I have to invent them, I'm going to do it. I want to live in the future, and it's not happening fast enough.

My friend and I always joke we were born 50 years too soon.
Do you want to go on the holodeck? Absolutely!

Games are a start of that. You're living in these worlds beyond just gameplay.
Exactly. And there's a lot of other things the future needs. I can't believe there aren't automatically driving automobiles. It's such pedestrian technology. No pun intended [laughs]. But yeah, stuff like that. There's just so many things that technology can give. There's a fear of failure in some ways.
play

Last Minute Windows Shopping

Civilization Chronicles

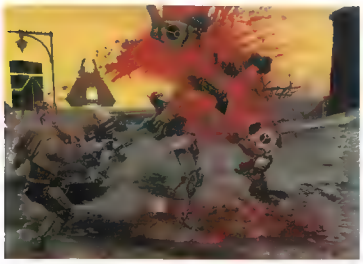
2K Games

Sid Meier's Civilization series has sold more than 7 million units worldwide and it is frequently cited as the most intuitive and in-depth world building franchise of all time. 2K has captured that greatness in Civilization Chronicles, a journey through each era of the series and a treasure trove of behind-the-scenes insight. Chronicles packs Civ I, Civ II and its three expansions, Civ III and its Play the World and Conquests expansions, and finally Civilization IV. It's your civil duty to introduce this series to someone.

Dawn of War Anthology

THQ

Good times for Canadian and UK readers, as they're now enjoying THQ's *awesome* Dawn of War Anthology, a big box-set featuring Dawn of War GOTY Edition, the Winter Assault expansion, and Dark Crusade, the new stand-alone expansion. All the armies, all the units and every playable race from every Dawn of War campaign equals massive Warhammer 40K satisfaction—and one of the top strategy series in recent memory, with Relic at the helm. Only a matter of time before a US version appears…



Dungeon Siege 2: Deluxe Edition

Microsoft

For Diablo I and II fans, the action and leveling style of the Dungeon Siege games will be pleasantly familiar. This Deluxe Edition includes Dungeon Siege 2 and the DS 2 expansion pack, Broken World. The kit also contains a making-of video, artwork and extra lore. The main attraction is the sheer volume of progressive RPG gameplay across the long campaigns. Pick it up for a friend and run the quest together online.

Star Wars: The Best of PC

LucasArts

This is the uber PC gift for any Star Wars fan. For $39.99 LucasArts is offering Star Wars: The Best of PC, a mega-compilation of contemporary SW games. There's something here for everyone: Star Wars: Empire at War will have strategy fans occupied, Knights of the Old Republic is a classic RPG that will keep *anyone* busy, Star Wars Battlefront is an accessible, large-scale third person action fest, while Republic Commando and Jedi Knight 2: Jedi Outcast are campaign shooters for FPS junkies. That's five Star Wars games (plus a 14-day free trial to Galaxies) for 40 bucks. The Best of PC is shipping only during the '06 holiday season.

STEALTH RELEASES

Devil May Cry 3 SE
Ubisoft
Sure, it's basically a trans-coded PS2 version, but you could do much worse than DMC 3 Special Edition in high-def resolutions, anti-aliased, with a Dual Shock in hand, on your PC. Too bad nobody knows it came out this fall.

Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines
Activision
Bloodlines released in 2004 with meager marketing and it quickly faded away. It's an intriguing and bizarre first-person action RPG—with very good voice work—worth pillaging the bargain bin for. Be sure to patch up.

Input Device

Microsoft Habu

by Microsoft and Razer

If the Razer Copperhead and Microsoft Intellimouse had a baby together, their progeny would be called Habu. Combining Microsoft's desktop hardware expertise with Razer's hardcore gaming precision, the Microsoft-branded, Razer co-developed Habu is a 2000 DPI wired mouse with conservative curves and tons of customizability under the hood.

There's no denying the speed and focus of a good wired gaming mouse. The Habu harnesses Razer's 1000 Hz polling system, an engine that uses a 16-bit data path for higher resolution detection. The Razer software allows deep control over sensitivity, scrolling, click speeds, polling and DPI values, and one can also assign keyboard macros to mouse-clicks. It's so

"...deep control over sensitivity, scrolling, click speeds, polling and DPI values..."

Selectable Side Buttons
Side button positions can be awkward for different hand sizes, so MS and Razer have included a removable panel and a pair of configurations.

handy, you might call it cheating. We ran the Habu through a battery of tests and it proved stable, accurate and comfortable. The ergonomic right-handed design is reminiscent of Microsoft's recent gaming mice, spiked with Razer's glowpipe side rails and rubber-coated buttons. The unit also contains its own onboard memory, so you can store a few profiles directly to the mouse.

We won't be retiring the general purpose G7 (once you go wireless, it's hard to go back), but the Habu, with its excellent build and strong performance, will stay connected as the preferred wired alternative.

Microsoft Habu SCORE 8.0

+

–

Display

Samsung 225BW

by Samsung Electronics

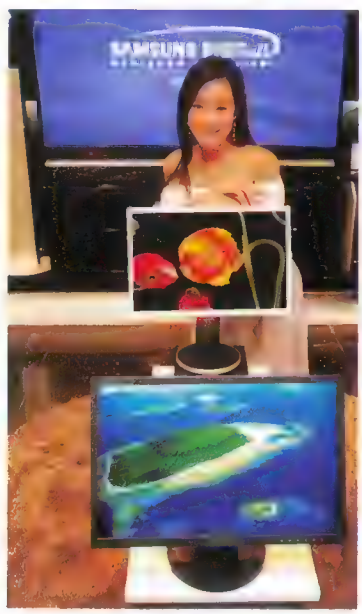
What if your video card that has more power than your monitor can deliver? Well, it's like playing a next-gen console on a standard definition TV: a crying shame. It's been a very expensive year and a 24-inch widescreen PC monitor might break the bank for many gamers, so we're taking a look at a fine and affordable compromise: the Samsung 225BW, a sleek 22-inch widescreen LCD monitor that excels at PC gaming.

It's hard to disagree with this monitor's fetching design. The bezel around the 225BW's screen is slim, strong and uncomplicated, free of tacky sculpted lines, weak speakers or dubious button positions. The display includes calibration software and the built-in tuning controls also do an excellent job. Tweaking brightness and color out of the box is an absolute must, as Samsung ships the 225BW over-bright and saturated. The display uses a third generation TN (Twisted Nematic) LCD panel, primarily built for speed but also markedly improved over previous TN panels in the area of color reproduction. The unit has inputs for both DVI and VGA (both cables are included), so it's possible to have a second computer—even an Xbox 360—connected simultaneously, toggling between them. Finally, the 225BW has tilting and height adjustment, and unlike many of its 22-inch peers, the stand doesn't feel flimsy.

"The bezel around the 225BW's screen is slim, strong and uncomplicated..."

The 225BW's native resolution is 1680 x 1050, so you'll need to set your desktop res to the same. It's best to run applications at this resolution whenever possible. Games like Half-Life 2: Ep. 1 look stunning on the 225BW, as the Source engine supports proper 16:10 widescreen in the monitor's lovely, native 1680 x 1050. The big $900 24-inch LCD monitors provide 1920 x 1200, but you need a monstrous twin-GPU computer to render at that resolution. A powerful single card will do the job just fine here, and 1680 x 1050 is nonetheless a *very* attractive resolution for gaming. Combined with 22-inches of widescreen real-estate and the panel's super-fast response time, Samsung's 225BW proves exceedingly proficient as a gaming display.

Scanning in at under $400, the 225BW is an excellent value. It's worth noting that our first unit was defective (excessive backlight bleed and a dead pixel) and had to be exchanged for another, so be sure to pick a vendor with a full return policy—just in case.



Tip: Install Microsoft's free ClearType tuner to vastly improve the appearance of text on LCD flat-panel monitors.

Samsung 225BW SCORE 8.0

+

–

EverQuest 2
Echoes of Faydwer

If an orc falls in the forest... Review

words **Mike Griffin**

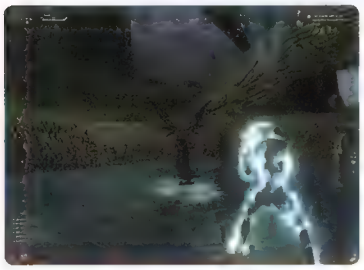
Developer	Sony Online Entertainment	Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment
Online/Multi	Persistent	Available	November

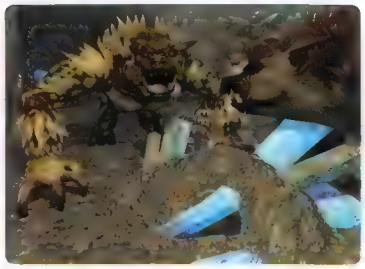
The new Echoes of Faydwer expansion pack for EverQuest 2 represents a fine introduction to SOE's stalwart sequel. In addition to Echoes, this all-in-one pack also contains the full version of EQ 2 and its previous expansions, Desert of Flames and Kingdom of Sky. For our purposes, it's all about Echoes of Faydwer and the current state of the game.

Echoes of Faydwer demonstrates a maturing design mentality, launching with lore, content and quests for all character levels, 1 through 70. One of the original EQ's most popular regions was the ancient, shadowy forest of Faydark. It is here that Echoes invites players to travel: from the Gnomes' subterranean clockwork city of Ak'Anon along the woodland's outskirts, to the murky depths of Kelethin, the great tree-city shared by elves and the newly introduced playable race, the Fae.

Questing our way up through mid-levels in the environs of the Echoes expansion proved faster and smoother than previous racial origin areas. The mission lines follow a more logical progress rate and quests link to one another in a more natural fashion, guiding the player outward in a wider circle—instead of relying on narrow stopgaps with lots of zoning. There are dozens of character achievements to develop and all-new tradeskill-crafted clothing, armor and trinkets to create. Rarely did we encounter two player characters that looked similar, once past the early levels.

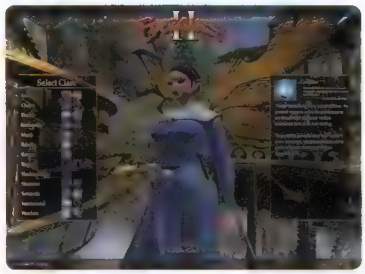
EQ 2's engine, while more generous on polygons and effects than most MMOs, is beginning to show its age, and in order to see it at its best it still requires a strong system. As always, the western fantasy art style will appeal greatly to some, while others will still prefer the Asian aesthetic or hybrid styles like WoW. Irrespective of artistic preference, the actual world layout of the Echoes environment is intelligent and undeniably vast. Most characters in





EQ 2 have full voice over and Echoes is no different. And like previous games in the series, the inflections and characterizations are often quite cheesy.

This EQ 2 all-in-one pack also includes a 30 day subscription, so if you've always wanted to see what the game is made of, Echoes of Faydwer is the perfect opportunity.



EverQuest 2
Echoes of Faydwer

score 8.0

\+ Great way to experience a range of EQ 2 content and lore. The Echoes expansion has many fine layers of progression for every character level

\- Graphically demanding yet overall inconsistent. Ultra perky and cornball delivery of VO lines can be irksome

"...the Echoes environment is intelligent and undeniably vast."

Medieval II: Total War
Put them in the iron maiden

Review

words **Mike Griffin**

Developer	The Creative Assembly	Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	1-8p battle maps	Available	November

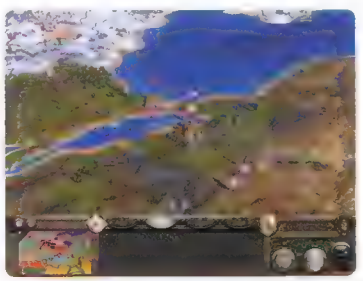
There are developers that *own* certain genres. Valve, id and Monolith are experts in the first person. If you want a beautiful and precise 3D fighter, hit up Namco, Tecmo or Sega. Need superior driving? Polyphony Digital, Bizarre and SimBin can preside. And if you desire the finest large-scale tactical strategy games, Medieval 2 makes a very good case for The Creative Assembly's mastery of the form. The latest entry in the Total War franchise is one killer, highly-polished RTS.

There's no better entry point to the Total War series than Medieval 2. As impressive as Rome TW is, Medieval 2 improves upon the formula. You will immediately notice the enhanced visuals. It's not just the updated lighting model or high-end atmospheric effects out on the battlefield; the troop units have substantial improvements in terms of art and animation. Combat has more reactive impact and diversity, and less cloned, robotic movement. Units also have unique bits of armor, even among the fodder, adding character to the medieval grunts storming the walls. Overall, the field combat looks amazing. You'll need a fast PC to witness these battles in their prime.

The tactical map mode incorporates new twists like roving merchants who add a little extra income to the reserve by seizing small scattered resources. The placement of towns and castles is a more calculated affair too, and while not as extensive as a pure world builder, Medieval 2 has an element of religion that can have a powerful effect on the course of events. This is the age of fanatical crusades to the holy lands, after all. The Pope monitors the status of Christian legions and faithful, punishing those who move against his flock.

One area The Creative Assembly still needs to perfect is interface. Granted, Medieval 2's interface is superior to most of its genre brethren, but unit control—whether on the tactical campaign map or battlefield—could use a little refinement. If only to match the outstanding quality you will observe everywhere else in this terrific strategy title.

"...troop units have substantial improvements in terms of art and animation."



Spectacular and frenetic large-scale battles compliment patient, cerebral kingdom building.

Medieval II: Total War

score 8.5

\+ [illegible]

\- [illegible]

Myst Online: Uru Live

Residents of the deep city — Review

Developer	Cyan Worlds	Publisher	Turner / GameTap
Online/Multi	Party puzzle solving	Available	December

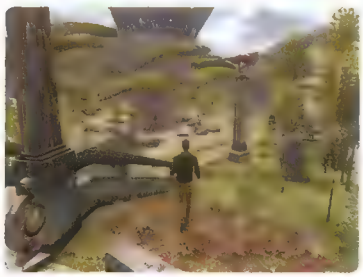
words **Mike Griffin**

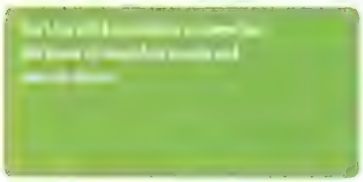
Cyan's beloved Myst series enjoyed many golden years as a global blockbuster, chalking up over 12 million unit sales, but its presence has been rather tepid in recent times. With Turner's healthy financial backing and GameTap as a distribution platform, Cyan aims to revive its champion with Myst Online: Uru Live, scheduled to arrive right after Christmas.

Uru Live is the culmination of many years of expert puzzle adventure design, now retrofitted to accommodate cooperative online gameplay. Player characters will be known as Explorers and plenty of clothing and customization options exist to distinguish one's real world-looking avatar. As Cyan founder Rand Miller attests, "It represents what we've always done with our worlds, which is not make you play a roleplaying game where we force you into being someone you're not; you really are *you* in this place."

Uru Live will feature a grand overarching mystery that the entire online player population reveals by solving puzzles and quandaries across dozens of exotic Ages (slices of the D'ni civilization's universe). Myst fans will love the gameplay and familiar visual design, and all players can meet and discuss their adventures at various social hubs.

Myst Online: Uru Live will be an exclusive to GameTap, the broadband entertainment hub. We re-visited GameTap again for this preview and came away impressed. The $9.95 monthly fee (or $60 for a year) opens an impressive selection of over 700 full titles. Stuff like the arcade version of Final Fight and Mercs, Alien Solider and Landstalker on Genesis, and the underappreciated Beyond Good & Evil—all on tap from a central hub—make GameTap very attractive. The fact that the same fee will also include Uru Live sweetens the deal.





"...the culmination of many years of expert puzzle adventure design."

Developer	GSC Gameworld	Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	16p online	Available	Q1 2007

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.

From Russia with mutagen — Preview

words **Mike Griffin**

In development for the better part of six years, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl is finally coming in early 2007 via THQ. GSC Gameworld's ambitious open-ended FPS is set in an alternate history where a second terrible nuclear accident occurred at Chernobyl in April 2006. A strange energy now chokes the crisis zone. By 2008, government scientists and clean-up crews seem hopeful about recovery, when suddenly mutants begin to appear. Word of strange and valuable artifacts—formed by intense nuclear forces—eventually permeates affluent society. Now the fallout region has become a relic hunting territory for highly-trained Stalkers. The action feels like a first-person shooter, however the game world is more akin to Oblivion, with a vast multi-tasking AI system called "A-Life" (sorry, no mutant Nightopians) that controls the behavior of almost one thousand virtual actors. Army forces patrol, fellow Stalkers continue their hunt, and mutants gibber and shamble, as day turns to night.

Developer	Acony	Publisher	Acony
Online/Multi	10p online teams	Available	Q2 2007

Parabellum

Start spreading the nukes — Preview

words **Mike Griffin**

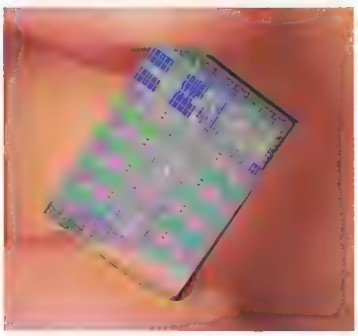
Parabellum is Acony's forthcoming Unreal Engine 3-powered team shooter and it's set to be a hardcore multiplayer affair. Designed under the supervision of several e-sports community leaders, Parabellum describes the unsettling theme of nuclear terror in New York. The extremist group Black November has paralyzed the city, threatening thermonuclear detonation unless all US forces pull out of the middle-east. Acony claims to have designed the largest urban multiplayer environment ever, with twelve massive chunks of city space arranged in residential, industrial and commercial zones. Intimate teams of five versus five (delta force vs. terrorist) wage Counter-Strike style tactical warfare across surprisingly destructible locations while seeking out bombs and anarchy. The UE 3 horsepower allows insane incendiary effects and sweet PhysX particles, and should you fail to disarm the 20 megaton warhead, there's a *really* big special effect. Better send Hiro back.

Twelve diverse weapons with up to 10 different modifications a piece.

ask alienware

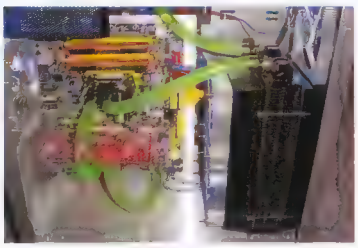
no. 008 // january 2007

Q. Will I be able to buy a Cell Chip for a PC in the future? I bet it would be a killer CPU to use in a gaming rig and I don't plan on buying a PlayStation 3 for a while. Ryan, Dakota IL.



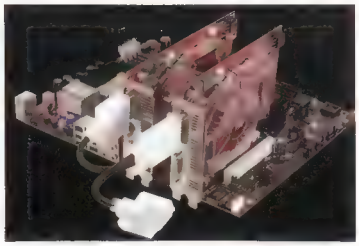
Alienware: Alienware is always looking at future technologies as they mature. Cell chips are one of these technologies and as the technology matures we will take a look at how this technology fits into the consumer PC space.

Q. I'm thinking about migrating my computer's innards to a new case. What's the best material to look for in a desktop case? Also: Could I set up my own liquid cooling system, or is it pretty tricky? Rather not have water splashing all over my PC! Tim, Birmingham UK.



Alienware: The best material for a new case is a matter of personal opinion. If you are planning on 'modding' your case, you will want a material that is easier to cut. If you are looking for a case that already has a design, material isn't as important. Whatever case you choose, make sure it reflects your inner gamer. As for the liquid cooling, it can be easy to set up and maintain. However, if you are not comfortable with the technical aspects of working inside of a desktop, don't mess with liquid cooling. The liquid will render your system useless if it begins leaking.

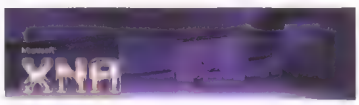
Q. Games like the Guild Wars series are optimized for multi-core CPU and multi-GPU, but that seems to be the exception. Why don't more developers include real multi-core code and SLI or Crossfire support in their games? Surely multi-processor PCs are becoming dominant now. Wayne, Redding CA.



Alienware: Multi-core CPUs can work with any game. What the OS will do is offload all other processes to the second core and dedicate the first core directly to the game. As for multi-GPU applications, regardless if the game supports it, your system will support it. There are a few games coming out that are fully optimized for multi-GPUs and you will see more of these in the future. Games have years

of development behind them and multi-GPU's are a relatively new technology. For a game developer to rebuild the code to optimize for multi-GPU could compromise the development cycle or delay the release.

Q. Going forward, do you think more Xbox 360 developers are likely to launch simultaneously with Vista versions? Thanks to XNA and all that stuff. I don't want to see PC-only games go extinct. John, Halifax NS.



Alienware: PC exclusive games will never go extinct. PC gaming allows everyone to enjoy the latest and greatest that

"The PC gaming market is an essential part of the industry."

hardware and software developers can create. The advantage of PC games is that the hardware on PC's refresh more often than on consoles which gives developers flexibility when developing games. The PC gaming market is an essential part of the industry.

Q. Does Alienware get to see early demos of cool new hardware before it's even announced? What kind of relationship do you guys have with hardware folks? Victor, San Francisco CA.

Alienware: Alienware does extensive testing on all hardware before we release it for production, therefore we do receive the hardware before it is launched. This being said, we have a close relationship with our vendors and we work with them so we can get the best products to our customers. We decide on configurations based on the performance that is delivered by each component.

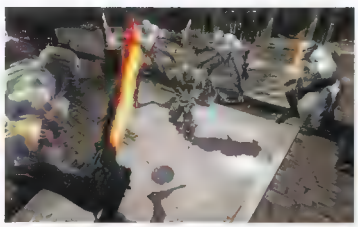
Q. Where do you foresee the swiftest advancements coming in the realm of PC gaming over the next few years? Susan, Austin TX.

Alienware: The next few years are going to be an exciting time for innovation in the computer industry. Advancements are going to come in the form of the CPU, GPU and PPU to produce more realism than we ever thought imaginable. Hardware vendors are working every day to improve the current solutions and develop new architectures from the ground up.

Postscript

Hellgate: London secures devilishly adept co-publisher

As-if partnerships with Valve and Crytek haven't guaranteed EA serious kickback on PC, the mega publisher has now reached an agreement with Namco Bandai Games and Flagship Studios to co-publish one of 2007's hottest-looking PC titles, Hellgate: London. When this intense action-RPG emerges from delay in early spring, it will hitch a ride aboard EA's vast distribution channels. "This partnership assures the best possible outcome for Hellgate: London," said Bill Roper, Flagship CEO, of the new pact. "By working with both companies in their undisputable areas of strength and expertise, we can bring the game to as many people as possible while maintaining our development focus and schedule."



	The Sims 2: Pets Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
	Medieval II: Total War	Sega of America
	World Of Warcraft	Vivendi Universal
	Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari
	MS Flight Simulator X Deluxe	Microsoft
	EverQuest II: Echoes Of Faydwer Expansion Pack	Sony Online Entertainment
	Battlefield 2142	Electronic Arts
	Call of Duty 2	Activision
	The Sims 2	Electronic Arts
	The Sims 2: Happy Holiday Stuff	Electronic Arts

Erratum

Last month we erroneously listed a couple of Razer's PC peripherals as "Razor" products. Our apologies.

Mark the date

12-26-06 **Myst Online: Uru Live**
12-31-06 **Streets of Rage Remake**
01-05-07 **UT 2007 demo**
01-16-07 **The Burning Crusade**
01-30-07 **Windows Vista**

Streets of Rage Remake on the way

Sega dropped the ball on the Streets of Rage/Bare Knuckle franchise generations ago, leaving a loyal fan base stranded with three great games, a little false hope on Dreamcast, and lots of dead air. Turn that frown upside down, comrades—there will be grand uppercuts in the Streets this holiday season. As fate would have it, some of the most hardcore SoR fans became coders, artists and musicians at Bombergames, the multi-national indie team responsible for Streets of Rage Remake. Imagine a perfect collection remix of good 'ole 2D, sprite-based Streets of Rage—with maximum respect for Ancient's material. This is Remake, the alternate universe story of all three SoR games where Adam lives and Mr. X continues to terrorize. Project lead Eddie Luna Bolano answers our questions.

interview
Eduard Luna Bolano, Project Lead

How many modes in Remake?
1p mode, 1p + CPU partner, 2p co-op, Battle (like SoR 2), Survival (like Golden Axe's Duel mode), Flag and Volleyball (unlockables).

Music is a huge part of the series. What's lined up for Remake?
We have 34 music tracks in all. All the mixes were made for SoRR, including stellar material by Gecko Yamori. Some are new, others are remixes of originals, all in Koshiro style. New remixes for player select screen, game over and stage clear too.

How many endings?
4 endings; two bad, one good, and one unresolved.

Will there be multi-path gameplay like SoR 3?
Yep, in some stages you will see secret paths unveiled when you defeat all the enemies. Different paths lead to different stories and endings. We'll have seven different paths in total.

Which SoR characters will be playable?
Eight characters (two secret): Adam, Axel, Blaze, Max, Skate and Zan.

How comprehensive is the moves list?
All SoR 2 and 3 moves are in and almost all the combined team specials. You can now move up and down when running and all characters have a new running special. There are also new combos for defensive moves. Characters can also use guns and ride motorbikes and jetskis.

Any SoR 1-style police specials?
You will indeed have two police calls: a helicopter attack and hit and run with the police car.

What kind of enhancements have you added to the stages?
All stages now have more scrolling layers, more colors and new atmospheric effects. We have new interactive objects as well. The remade stages are based on the originals from all three Streets of Rage games.

We hear SoRR may be ported to console or portable, but for now, what kind of computer will run Remake?
It will run on anything. A 700 MHz P3 with 128 megs of RAM, a 16-bit sound card, and a USB control pad.

When is the PC version going to bare its knuckles?
December 31st. Happy holidays, Streets of Rage fans.

> "All stages now have more scrolling layers, more colors and new atmospheric effects."

Eduard Luna Bolano, Project Lead

Full Metal Panic The Second Raid

Panic Attack: Part 3

—d. Dave Halverson

FUNimation	175 Minutes
TV 14	Now

Picking up where season one left off, season three of Full Metal Panic already looks to be its best—as superb as it's been thus far—although new recruits may find themselves scratching their heads. Sans any type of recap, we join Mithril's forces engaged in the heat of battle against an atypical terrorist threat. And while the bumbling dictator and his clunky minions are rather easily vanquished (with a little help from Captain Testarossa) the maniac that supplied their arms, a Mr. Gates, proves to be a much wilier foe. He's after the Arbalest, and he's got a Lamda drive! Meanwhile, in the heat of battle, all Sousuke Sagara can think about is his math homework while Kaname—the girl he's sworn to protect—is already steamed that he's late for class. Not because she cares about him, but because he has her notes. Now for the translation: Mithril is a shadow organization that uses high tech AS units (Assault Suits) and an amphibious base dubbed Toy Box to thwart global terrorism. The Arbelast is their most powerful AS, piloted by Sousuke, the only pilot with the mental capacity to use the Lamda drive; a mechanism which psychically connects the pilot's emotions with the armored suit causing it to act on his thoughts. When Sousuke isn't on the battlefield he poses as a regular high school student (if you consider an armed madman a regular high school student) working undercover to protect the beautiful blue-haired but short-tempered Kaname Chidori, who possesses the special powers of "The Whispered" —a head full of black magic that remains somewhat mysterious although we know that she can infiltrate and control sophisticated military AI through some sort of telepathy. The fun and hi-jinx of Full Metal Panic Fumoffu (the series' cheeky 4-volume intermission) has come to a close, and it's back to business.

Not that FMP hasn't always delivered the quality goods, but The Second Raid—at least Volume 1—is one of the most impressive made-for-TV series, animation and quality-wise, that I have ever seen. This is an absolutely beautiful show from the animation to the effects and integrated CG. With any luck TSR will stay the 70/30 action to comedy course exhibited in Ops 01, and give us the ride of our lives. It's even packed with quality extras. Now there's something you don't see everyday.

Full Metal Panic: The Second Raid

score 9.5

+

-

"...one of the most impressive made-for-TV series, animation and quality-wise, that I have ever seen."

" Watch out folks.
This frog could conquer
America just as early
as he conquered Japan! "
–Anime Insider
Sgt. FROG
THE INVASION
IS COMING!
ADV FILMS
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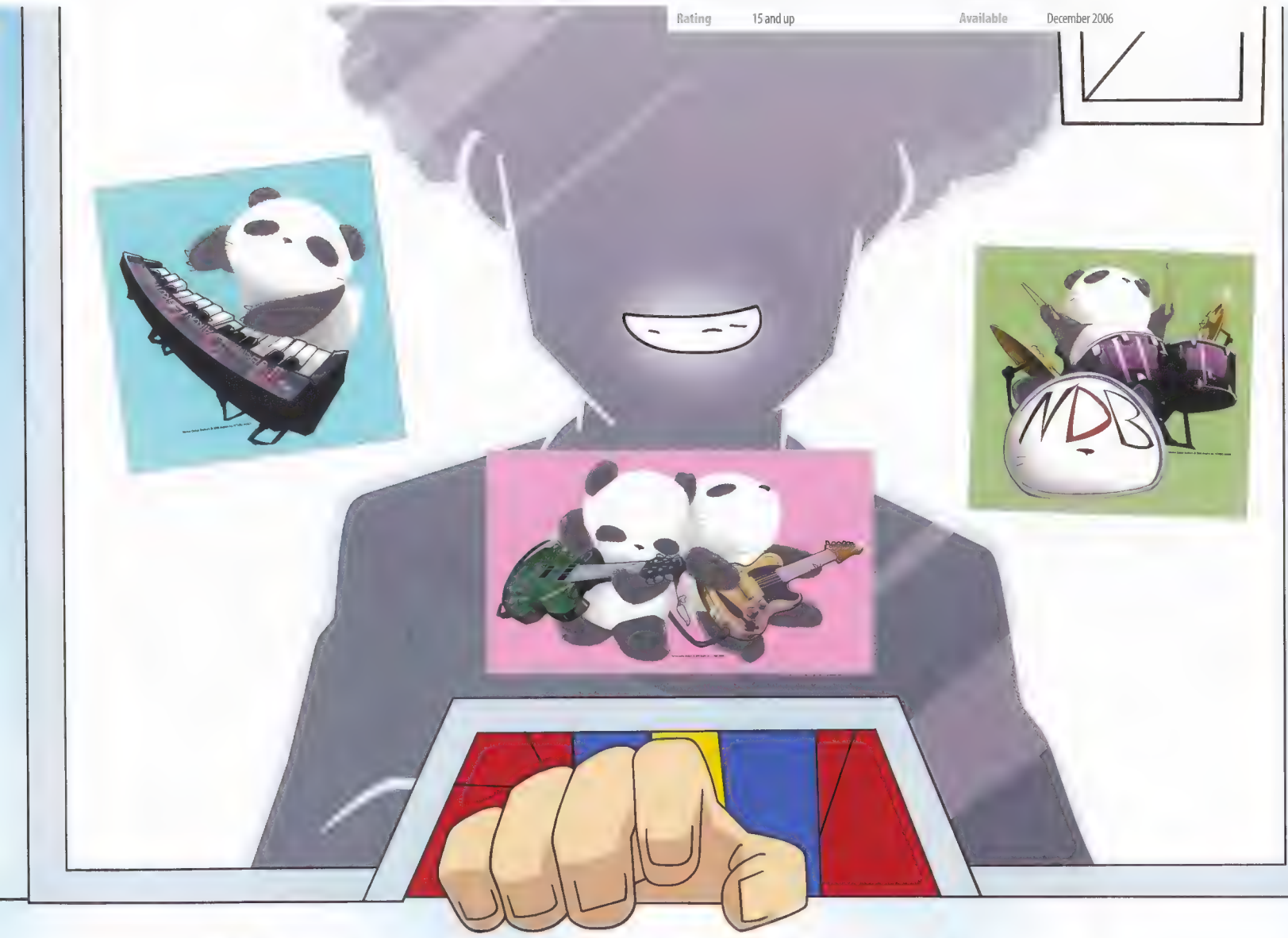
Released by	ADV Films	Running Time	100 Minutes
Rating	15 and up	Available	December 2006



Nerima Daikon Brothers

words **Bill Gray**

The Sound of Music this ain't. *Nerima Daikon Brothers*, from director Shinichi Watanabe, continues the tradition he started in *Excel Saga* of over-the-top, zany, sometimes crude, humor. The show then takes it to completely different plane by adding . . . music?

That's right—instead of all that pesky dialogue, the bulk of *NDB* consists of characters singing and dancing. These songs instantly separate the show from any anime out there. At their best, the musical numbers are clever, catchy and fun.

The Nerima Daikon Brothers (and sister too!) are struggling musicians growing daikon (a Japanese radish—I'm not a fan of the vegetable) in the Nerima district of Tokyo. Their dream? To build a concert dome to hold their legions of adoring fans on the daikon field. They only have two problems—no money, and no adoring fans.

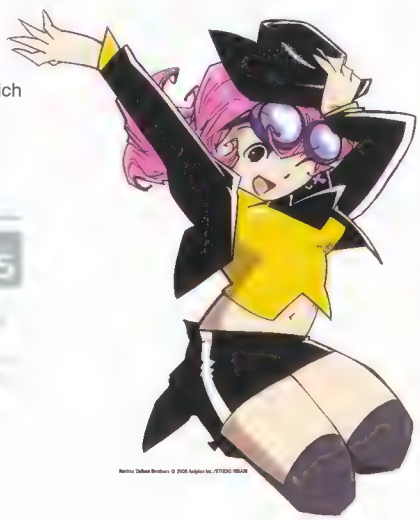
Episodes follow a familiar pattern—the Daikon Brothers run afoul of some quirky/sketchy member of Japanese society, then get revenge using an item (portable enema, anyone?) from a rental shop run by Watanbe himself.

This formulaic episode arc feels out of place, especially when the content of the show is stuffed with offbeat references to Japanese and American culture, from Star Wars to former Prime Minister Koizumi.

Songs, while funny on first listen, are re-used throughout multiple episodes and sometimes within the same episode, which gets old quickly.

NDB is a worthy successor to *Excel Saga* which should be enjoyed in small doses—like daikon itself, actually.

score 8.5



"That's right—instead of all that pesky dialogue, the bulk of NDB consists of characters singing and dancing."

SHONEN JUMP

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Kirameki Project

Released by	Media Blasters	Running Time	100 mins.
Rating	13 and up	Available	October 31

Let's give her a big hand.

"Half of the laughs of the show are intentional, the other half are embarrassed giggles at the sheer audacity of the fanservice."

words **Heather Campbell**

Firstly, let's get one thing straight. I didn't expect to enjoy this show. The character design is second-rate, the cel animation is choppy and sparse, the voice acting is forgettable -- even the packaging is cluttered with a poor montage of oddball art. Five minutes into the DVD, I didn't anticipate having a fun hour-fifteen. Furthermore, I think of myself as a bit of an anime maven, and had never even heard a whisper about Kirameki Project.

All that being said, after the first episode was finished, I watched the next two in a single sitting. Kirameki Project was weirdly charming, surprisingly funny, and consistently well-paced. I had a great time despite the obvious shortcomings of this B-release OVA. And what do you know: I'm most certainly going to check out the second (and final) volume of this quirky little giant-robot-magical-girl comedy.

Now, Kirameki isn't for everyone. I can't even really guess as to the target demographic. I'm assuming the disc is selling only to the hard-core otaku. There are far too many sparkly, magical girls for the show to be a comfortable show for most guys. On the other hand, every-other-shot in the show is up-skirt, meaning most girls will be a little unsettled. Half of the laughs of the show are intentional, the other half are embarrassed giggles at the sheer audacity of the fanservice. When one of the heroes launches a spread-eagle, panty-flashing attack on the face of her training partner, you can't help but chuckle. Kirameki knows what it is, and has no problem putting it on display.

I guess I should include some sort of plot synopsis here, not that it really matters what the show is about when the story is so secondary to the comedy. Regardless, here it is. Kirameki basically tells the story of a giant robot development team who are determined to test their technology against the robots of the world. After taking on the giant robot from Germany, they head to the Mediterranean country of Genes, and are defeated by an enormous, semi-sentient magical-girl robot. Taken down by a single strike from her purse, the "Big Mighty" is defeated, and with the loss comes a chain reaction of results. The development team loses funding, and the CEO loses face. So now, it's up to the eccentric robot team to save their project from shutdown by facing the giant magical girl once more.

Or, *alternately*, you could look at the show as the story of three princesses in the country of Genes, who defend their homeland from mysterious robot invaders by activating cutting-edge technology. The girls rely on power suits, heroic knights, and a secret weapon that lives in a giant dollhouse whenever invaders threaten their land. Ignorant of their enemy's intentions, the princesses take time off to visit the beach and flash their cleavage whenever they're not fighting. Or even when they are fighting.

In a giant-robot comedy, only one thing matters: does it make you laugh? The answer here was a resounding yes. Kirameki is really funny, both because of the sometimes subtle parody, and the always overt, sophomoric sexuality. And what other show features a towering, vapid, straight-out-of-Appleseed CG rendered magical girl robot?

Kirameki Project score 7.5

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PaniPoni Dash

Eleven G oing on Fifty

Smart kids are nothing new. Ones that graduate from MIT by the age of ten and teaching by eleven however are something of an anomaly. Rebecca Miyamoto, child genius has got her hands full with Class 1-C; so much so that she ends up hiding behind the window curtain for half the first day because she's teased for being just so darn cute. Fortunately she has a jaded side, and boy howdy does it ever surface. She's not interested in learning their names, rips the cowlick off fawning student Himeko's head (to which she expels a volume of purple gas from), and, well... flips them the bird. She's not taking crap from anyone-- so either learn or get the heck out.

If you were a fan of *Azumanga Daioh*, *Cromartie High School*, or even *Excel Saga*, then rest assured you're going to get the level of madcap humor on this show. The jokes fly faster than a spitball shootout, but fortunately aren't as gross. Hilary Haag is sickeningly perfect as the voice of smart-mouthed little Rebecca. The cast of this show however is huge (if you don't count the alien voyeurs and talking animals), so keeping track of who's who in what class proves fruitless most of the time, and plays up the usual stereotypes. The show is rife with cultural in-jokes, and turning on the vid-notes might be a mistake-- the show is so saturated of them you might as well use this show as a Japanese pop culture primer. The humor ranks up to the level of bizarre, with talking cats that live in

"Pacing of the humor is rapid-fire..."

vending machines, emo rabbits, and an enigmatic student that serves poisoned treats to put depressed characters out of their misery (though fortunately very much alive the next episode), just to name a few. Pacing of the humor is rapid-fire and will probably result in a few quick rewinds per episode. The episodes final scenes are undeniably mean in their teasing-- incredible or strange phenomenon are set up, only to be deliberately ignored in the next chapter.

At five episodes, anime comedy fans will definitely get their money's worth from this. Just stay away from that talking cat who warms drinks up from his body heat-- that's just wrong on *so many* levels. **Jim Dewey**

score 8.5

\+ No shortage of comedy here-- sight gags and verbal smart-assery abound; tightly well-animated.

\- Cast is so big that character development is often impossible; humor isn't to everyone's taste.

King of the Braves: GaoGaiGar

Final fusion...

I never thought I'd see the day when a bullet train was used as a weapon. Never underestimate Japanese animation, because in *GaoGaiGar: King of the Braves*, Media Blasters' latest giant robot epic, a train, along with a stealth bomber, a drill dozer, a mechanical lion, and a cyborg are the principal tools in humanity's fight against an alien menace.

When these disparate vehicles are meshed together, they become the super-powerful GaoGaiGar in a sequence dubbed "Final Fusion." That phrase "Final Fusion" sums up the entire series pretty well, actually.

Mix two parts *Voltron* with one part *Evangelion*—being sure to separate out the psychological introspection. Add in a dash of *Transformers* and a pinch of *Gundam*, and you have the recipe for *GaoGaiGar*.

This particular battle to save Tokyo revolves around Guy, the cyborg who fights the front line battles, and who pilots the transformed GaoGaiGar and Mamoru, an eight-year-old boy with the power to fly as well as purify humans infected by the evil Zonders, aliens who would like

"3G Possesses a simple charm..."

nothing more than to take over the world, naturally.

Written for children, *3G* possesses a simple charm primarily because it isn't trying to be anything more than a kid's show. Courage, bravery, and powerful mecha carry the day in a series that is basic and sincere, with visually arresting transformation sequences, breathless narration, and appealing character designs.

Hampered slightly by an unsightly video transfer, there's nothing new to *GaoGaiGar*. Perhaps that's part of its appeal. **Bill Gray**

score 7.0

\+ A transforming mecha epic that does all things decently.

\- A transforming mecha epic that does nothing exceptionally.

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Utopias Avenger

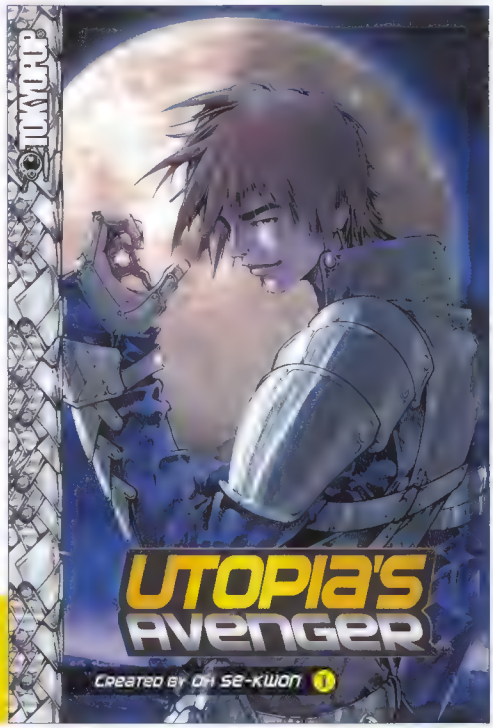
Something wicked this way comes

[illegible]	Tokyopop	[illegible]	Supernatural Action	Volume	1
[illegible]	Oh-Se-Kwon	[illegible]	Oh-Se-Kwon	[illegible]	13+

I'm going to go out on a limb on say that Utopias Avenger is one of the best shonen manga that I have ever seen or read. The dichotomy between the sci-fi elements—Final Fantasy tinged bikes and digital cameras against a supernatural martial arts back drop—defines the beauty of manga. It is, simply put, exquisite. At moments the dialogue dances in your mind fusing with the pictures like you're watching a film before segueing to action so deftly captured by the pen that the figures seem to move on the page. The character and world design, marked by some of the most painstaking shading I have ever seen, in the manwha tradition, pulls you into the simple fluid story—concentrating more on key moments and expressions than monologues to draw you into the world. Time fly's by as you read before vigorously flipping back to soak in the imagery.

The tale is of Gil-Dong; a Hyeongyeong master who built a Utopia called Yuldo Kingdom only to see it ravaged by invaders. Twenty years have past and now he has returned to the region as a bounty hunter so omnipotent that he is aging backwards. At 45 he looks 20. But he and his partner Danu are not gods....well, not quite. Their fight to vanquish the evil that has stolen their land and rebuild the kingdom is fraught with peril and demons that quite enjoy life around Death Castle. Manga has just become a spectator sport.

Read it if... Moments of subtle comedy interjected with unparalleled sci-fi and martial arts sounds like a good way to dust off an afternoon.



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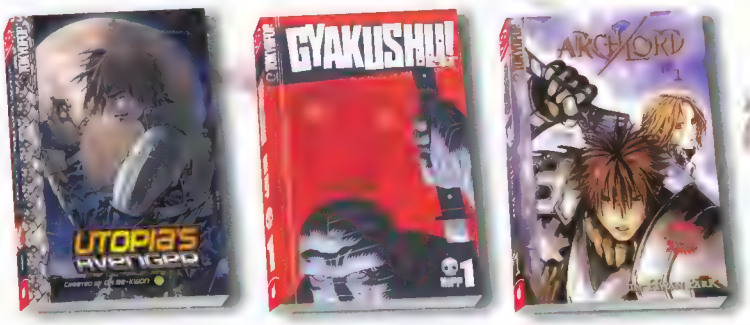

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Masamune Shirow's Dominion

Publisher: Dark Horse Comics **Volume:** 1
Rating: Teen **Genre:** Sci-Fi

One of Masamune Shirow's most beloved works, Dark Horse Comics' new graphic novel series is the ultimate way to soak in one of the most raucous stories in all of sci-fi, about the men and women of the Tank Police: the only thing standing between order and anarchy in a toxic future. Absolutely essential reading.

Chugworth Academy

Publisher: Seven Seas **Volume:** 1
Rating: 16+ **Genre:** Comedy

Seven Seas' full-color collection of comic strips from Dave Cheung and Jamal Joseph Jr. follows the everyday exploits of the beautiful, intelligent and athletic Sally and her dopey boyfriend Kiyoshi. As slice-of-life ensembles go, it doesn't get any better.

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Gun X Sword OST 2 Psychic Academy

Publisher: Geneon Anime Music

The latest anime music from Geneon, Psychic Academy and GunXSword OST 2 both indulge the listener in an array of musical variety from the introspective, to rock, pop and the cheeky kind of audible enjoyment you can only get from anime.

Hellsing Ultimate Series: 1

Publisher: Geneon Entertainment **Volume:** 1
Rating: 16 **Genre:** Horror

No Hellsing fan should be without Geneon's limited edition 2-disc set. Packed into a shiny tin, features include a 16x9 transfer from the HD master in 5.1 DTS (including an audio commentary) on disc 1 and staff interviews, a promotional music video, trailers, TV commercials and more on disc 2. Hell yes.

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Azumi

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

I'll be honest here: I could watch cute blood-soaked Japanese girls slicing and dicing foes all day long. The sexy samurai in question here is Azumi, a young orphan raised to be a ruthless assassin. J-pop starlet Aya Ueto plays the part perfectly, portraying a girl torn between being the killing machine she was taught to be, and doing what she knows in her heart is right. Backing her up is a stellar supporting cast, with characters both good and evil that are equally enjoyable.

Acclaimed *Versus* director Ryuhei Kitamura was picked to bring the original Azumi manga series to the big screen, and this very much feels like anime turned live action. The film's numerous sword fights are over the top, totally unbelievable, ridiculously bloody, and oh so much fun. This isn't just a shallow popcorn flick, however: we're given an emotional tale of heartache, loss, and the unavoidable fate Azumi and her companions face. Come for the swords, stay for the story. **Eric L. Patterson**

Fearless

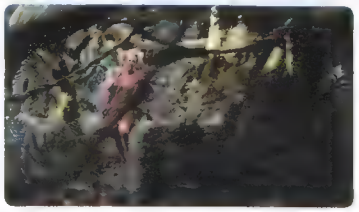
Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Fearless was hyped as Jet-Li's last movie, but rumors of his retirement have proven to be greatly exaggerated. That's good news, since *Fearless* isn't much of a swan song.

The story is based on life of Huo Yuanjia, the founder of a famous martial arts school, but with the facts perverted to make all the western characters into mustache-twirling beings of pure evil. I can't agree with the sentiment in general, but I will concede that the Chinese are vastly more skilled at directing Jet-Li films. After a series of hideous Hollywood movies like *Unchained*, it's good to see Jet-Li back in the able hands of a director who knows how to direct a fight scene without a bunch unnecessary quick-cuts and CGI effects. It's a testament to the quality of the fights that we're willing to sit through an anti-Western propaganda film to watch them, but they're far from Jet-Li's best work. It's especially disappointing that the producers didn't use the DVD as an opportunity to restore the many scenes (including a subplot featuring Michelle Yeoh) that were cut from the original theatrical release. *Fearless* isn't terrible, but it's no Hero. **CL**

King Kong

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:



If you can't get enough of Peter Jackson's *King Kong*, Universal is offering a deluxe extended version that restores 14 minutes to the original film and includes an additional 30+ minutes of unfinished scenes in its extensive library of bonus features.

The highlight of the new cut is a pair of dinosaur battle scenes added to the Skull Island section of the film. There are a few shots that seem shoddily composited, but the new scenes are undeniably impressive. The underwater Piranhadon battle is a particular highlight, and cutting it must have been a heartbreaking decision.

The other additions consist of new lines of dialogue and some third-act scenes from the perspective of the soldiers that are fighting Kong. None of it feels at all necessary—the obvious problem is that *King Kong* was way too long of a movie to begin with, and I'd rather have a focused, disciplined two-hour cut than one that swells past the 200 minute mark. The special features weren't available for review, but include a new audio commentary, unfinished deleted scenes, several hours of making-of documentaries that are exclusive to this version, and a gag reel. It's a stunningly complete package, but for a rare film in which less would have been much more. **Casey Loe**

Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby (Blu-Ray)

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

After *Anchorman* I didn't think it could get any better, but *Talladega* comes close. If you like your comedy trashy and over the top—unrelenting in its pursuit of laughter no matter how outrageous, then *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* is for you. Trailer-park chic has never felt so good. Combined with the NASCAR's über-hick fandom ratcheted up to hazardous levels, rather than rely on parody, *Talladega* creates its own almost fantastical NASCAR universe where it's not just okay to be a self-centered, junk-food-loving, barbaric half-wit; it's downright admirable. As good as Will Ferrell is, once again, just like *Anchorman*, the supporting characters really drive Ricky Bobby home. From his misguided offspring to his best friend Cal (John C. Reilly) rival Jean Girard (Sacha Baron Cohen a.k.a. Borat) and wife (Leslie Bibb), every supporting role is honed to comedic perfection, and all in gorgeous 1080i. Special features on the Blu-Ray disc also run deep, far exceeding what's available on the standard release and it all looks almost illegally hi-res. **Dave Halverson**

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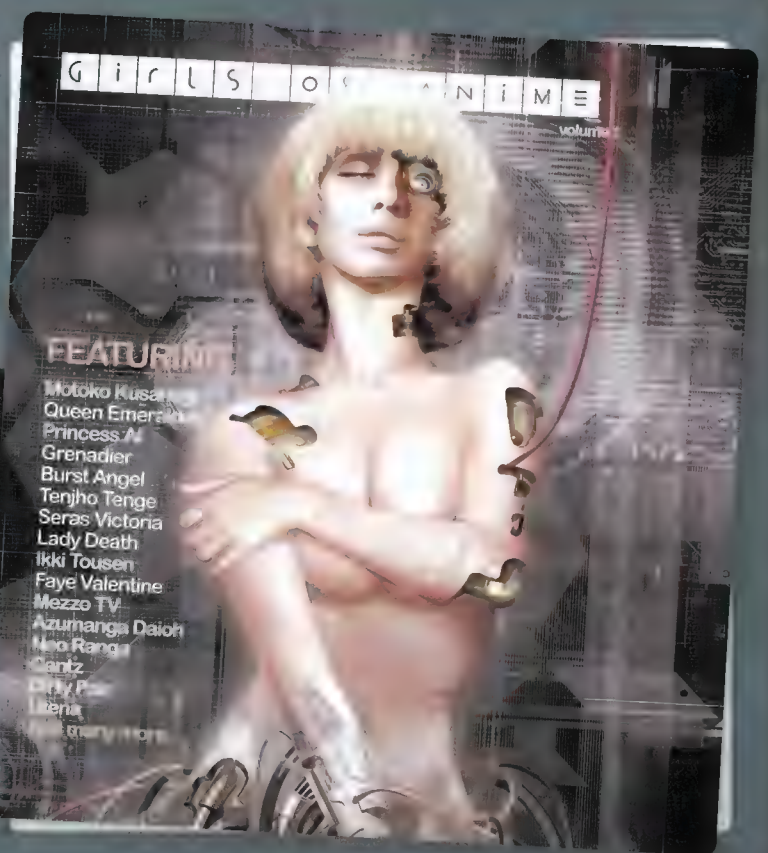

BACK OF THE BOOK

01_07 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
with contributions by:
MIKE GRIFFIN & MICHAEL HOBBS

The talk of the town...

We enjoy lists. It's Christmas. A wish list makes sense to ring in the New Year. If you don't celebrate Christmas, perhaps you still like lists and will enjoy this special holiday Back of the Book Wish List 2006. In no particular order, we wish for...

1) Peace on earth when new shipments of PlayStations 3 make their way onto the shelves before the year's end. No shootouts. No running into poles.

2) World War II is retired as a theme in video games.

3) Blu-ray kicks HD DVD's ass. Or HD DVD kicks Blu-ray's ass. Just as long as there's one winner, I'm happy.

4) Mario Galaxy is as good as my expectations want it to be.

5) Developers start to find a true voice for game design, dumping the idea that games must emulate movies. Academic gaming beats are discovered, weaving eloquently within filmatic beats. They develop a singular language, and we no longer continue to skip through cut scenes and get angry when we can't skip through cut scenes.

6) Gears of War makes the original IP more viable. Go Gears of War, go original IPs!

7) Shiny texturing gets replaced by natural, organic-looking surfaces that don't reflect LIKE MAD.

8) "I have a bad feeling about this" is retired from video game dialogue.

9) Someone openly admits that we're on the verge of actually being able to call characters in our games truly sexy. Oy.

10) The industry calls for a breast reduction and sensible clothing for maiden warriors who need more sensible clothing when they're in combat. Think about it: all that exposed skin and all these poor ladies running through mosquito- and bug-infested swamps and dungeons.

11) Random dungeons no longer exist in game design.

12) Somebody runs into Sony's offices and gives whoever made the decision to allow non-Sony memory cards to work on PS3 a giant hi-five!

13) Games somehow don't cost 60 dollars anymore.

14) Nintendo accepts my apology for secretly thinking the Wii would be a bust. Love the controller and the alternative it provides. It's a shame the technology is lame, but you can't have it all. Respect to Nintendo for innovating in a most unorthodox manner.

15) Nintendo ditches the name "Wii"

16) Wii Virtual Console gets all the Castlevanias and all the Metroids

17) Small studios thrive. Big studios don't buy up every last small studio, and original, progressive content grows stronger than ever.

18) Hironobu Sakaguchi's 360 games turn-out to be awesome.

19) Sega announces Nights sequel for Wii.

"Peace on earth when new shipments of PlayStations 3 make their way onto the shelves before the year's end. No shootouts. No running into poles."

20) More console exclusives, less multi-platform releases.

21) Halo 3 single-player demo by summer.

22) A $100 PS3 price drop before its first anniversary.

23) Somebody launches a MMO game that can slow down Warcraft.

24) Sony's network services catch up to XBL.

25) The PSP has more than two games worth playing.

26) The Nintendo DS continues its wondrous run of 2D revival.

27) Somebody doesn't all the sudden decide to bring back E3.

28) Better WiiConnect 24.

29) Pikmin on Wii. Imagine it!

30) The death of 480i.

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